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GWEN WYNN.

G W E N W Y N N:

A Romance of the Wye.

BY

CAPTAIN MAYNE REID,

AUTHOR OF "LOST LENORE," "THE WHITE GAUNTLET," "HALF-BLOOD,"
"THE RIFLE RANGERS," "THE MAROON," ETC.

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G W E N W Y N N :

A Romance of the Wye.



CHAPTER I.

ONCE MORE UPON THE RIVER.

NOWHERE in England, perhaps nowhere in Europe, is the autumnal foliage more charmingly tinted than on the banks of the Wye, where it runs through the shire of Hereford. There Vaga threads her way amid woods that appear painted, and in colours almost as vivid as those of the famed American forests. The beech, instead of, as elsewhere, dying off dull bistre, takes a tint of bright amber; the chestnut turns translucent lemon; the oak leaves show rose colours along their edges, and

the wych-hazel coral red by its umbels of thickly clustering fruit. Here and there along the high-pitched hill sides flecks of crimson proclaim the wild cherry, spots of hoar white bespeak the climbing clematis, scarlet the holly with its wax-like berries, and maroon red the hawthorn; while interspersed and contrasting are dashes of green in all its varied shades, where yews, junipers, gorse, ivy, and other indigenous evergreens display their living verdure throughout all the year, daring winter's frosts, and defying its snows.

It is autumn now, and the woods of the Wye have donned its dress; no livery of faded green, nor sombre russet, but a robe of gaudiest sheen, its hues scarlet, crimson, green, and golden. Brown October elsewhere, is brilliant here; and though leaves have fallen, and are falling, the sight suggests no thought of decay, nor brings sadness to the heart of the beholder. Instead, the gaudy tapestry hanging from the trees, and the gay-coloured carpet spread underneath, but gladden it. Still further is it

rejoiced by sounds heard. For the woods of Wyeseide are not voiceless, even in winter. Within them the birds ever sing, and although their autumn concert may not equal that of spring,—lacking its leading tenor, the nightingale—still is it alike vociferous and alike splendidly attuned. Bold as ever is the flageolet note of the blackbird; not less loud and sweet the carol of his shier cousin the thrush; as erst soft and tender the cooing of the cushat; and with mirth unabated the cackle of the green woodpecker, as with long tongue, prehensile as human hand, it penetrates the ant-hive in search of its insect prey.

* * * * *

October it is; and where the Wye's silver stream, like a grand glistening snake, meanders amid these woods of golden hue and glorious song, a small row-boat is seen dropping downward. There are two men in it; one rowing, the other seated in the stern sheets, steering. The same individuals have been observed before in like relative position and similarly occupied.

For he at the oars is Jack Wingate, the steerer Captain Ryecroft.

Little thought the young waterman, when that "big gift"—the ten pound bank-note—was thrust into his palm, he would so soon again have the generous donor for a fare.

He has him now, without knowing why, or inquiring. Too glad once more to sit on his boat's thwarts, *vis-à-vis* with the Captain, it would ill become him to be inquisitive. Besides, there is a feeling of solemnity in their thus again being together, with sadness pervading the thoughts of both, and holding speech in restraint. All he knows is that his old fare has hired him for a row down the river, but bent on no fishing business. For it is twilight. His excursion has a different object; but what the boatman cannot tell. No inference could be drawn from the laconic order he received at embarking.

"Row me down the river, Jack!" distance and all else left undefined.

And down Jack is rowing him in regular

measured stroke, no words passing between them. Both are silent, as though listening to the splash of the oar blades, or the roundelay of late singing birds on the river's bank.

Yet neither of these sounds has place in their thoughts; instead, only the memory of one different and less pleasant. For they are thinking of cries—shrieks heard by them not so long ago, and still too fresh in their memory.

Ryecroft is the first to break silence, saying,—

“This must be about the place where we heard it.”

Although not a word has been said of what the “it” is, and the remark seems made in soliloquy rather than as an interrogation, Wingate well knows what is meant, as shown by his rejoinder:—

“It's the very spot, Captain.”

“Ah! you know it?”

“I do—am sure. You see that big poplar standing on the bank there?”

“Yes; well?”

“ We wor just abreast o’ it when ye bid me hold way. In course we must a heard the screech just then.”

“ Hold way now! Pull back a length or two. Steady her. Keep opposite the tree!”

The boatman obeys; first pulling the back stroke, then staying his craft against the current.

Once more relapsing into silence, Rye-croft sends his gaze down stream, as though noting the distance to Llangorren Court, whose chimneys are visible in the moonlight now on. Then, as if satisfied with some mental observation, he directs the other to row off. But as the kiosk-like structure comes within sight, he orders another pause, while making a minute survey of the summer-house, and the stretch of water between. Part of this is the main channel of the river, the other portion being the narrow way behind the eyot; on approaching which the pavilion is again lost to view, hidden by a tope of tall trees. But once within the bye-way it can be

again sighted; and when near the entrance to this the waterman gets the word to pull into it.

He is somewhat surprised at receiving this direction. It is the way to Llangorren Court, by the boat-stair, and he knows the people now living there are not friends of his fare—not even acquaintances, so far as he has heard. Surely the Captain is not going to call on Mr. Lewin Murdock—in amicable intercourse?

So queries Jack Wingate, but only of himself, and without receiving answer. One way or other he will soon get it; and thus consoling himself, he rows on into the narrower channel.

Not much farther before getting convinced that the Captain has no intention of making a call at the Court, nor is the *Mary* to enter that little dock, where more than once she has lain moored beside the *Gwendoline*. When opposite the summer-house he is once more commanded to bring to, with the intimation added,

“ I’m not going any farther, Jack.”

Jack ceases stroke, and again holds the skiff so as to hinder it from drifting.

Ryecroft sits with eyes turned towards the cliff, taking in its façade from base to summit, as though engaged in a geological study, or trigonometrical calculation.

The waterman, for a while wondering what it is all about, soon begins to have a glimmer of comprehension. It is clearer when he is directed to scull the boat up into the little cove where the body was found. Soon as he has her steadied inside it, close up against the cliff's base, Ryecroft draws out a small lamp, and lights it. He then rises to his feet, and leaning forward, lays hold of a projecting point of rock. On that resting his hand, he continues for some time regarding the scratches on its surface, supposed to have been made by the feet of the drowned lady in her downward descent. Where he stands they are close to his eyes, and he can trace them from commencement to termination. And so doing, a shadow of doubt is seen to steal

over his face, as though he doubted the finding of the Coroner's jury, and the belief of every one that Gwendoline Wynn had there fallen over.

Bending lower, and examining the broken branches of the juniper, he doubts no more, but is sure—convinced of the contrary!

Jack Wingate sees him start back with a strange surprised look, at the same time exclaiming,—

“ I thought as much ! No accident !—no suicide—murdered ! ”

Still wondering, the waterman asks no questions. Whatever it may mean, he expects to be told in time, and is therefore patient.

His patience is not tried by having to stay much longer there. Only a few moments more, during which Ryecroft bends over the boat's side, takes the juniper twigs in his hand, one after the other, raises them up as they were before being broken, then lets them gently down again !

To his companion he says nothing to explain this apparently eccentric manipula-

tion, leaving Jack to guesses. Only when it is over, and he is apparently satisfied, or with observation exhausted, giving the order,—

“ Way, Wingate ! Row back—up the river ! ”

With alacrity the waterman obeys ; but too glad to get out of that shadowy passage. For a weird feeling is upon him, as he remembers how there the screech owls mournfully cried, as if to make him sadder when thinking of his own lost love.

Moving out into the main channel and on up stream, Ryecroft is once more silent and musing. But on reaching the place from which the pavilion can be again sighted, he turns round on the thwart and looks back. It startles him to see a form under the shadow of its roof—a woman !—how different from that he last saw there ! The ex-cocotte of Paris—faded flower of the Jardin Mabille—has replaced the fresh beautiful blossom of Wyeseide—blighted in its bloom !

CHAPTER II.

THE CRUSHED JUNIPER.

NOTWITHSTANDING the caution with which Captain Ryecroft made his reconnaissance, it was nevertheless observed. And from beginning to end. Before his boat drew near the end of the eyot, above the place where for the second time it had stopped, it came under the eye of a man who chanced to be standing on the cliff by the side of the summer-house.

That he was there by accident, or at all events not looking out for a boat could be told by his behaviour on first sighting this; neither by change of attitude nor glance of eye evincing any interest in it. His reflection is—

“Some fellows after salmon, I suppose. Have been up to that famous catching place by the Ferry, and are on the way

home downward—to Rock Weir, no doubt ?
Ha ! ”

The ejaculation is drawn from him by seeing the boat come to a stop, and remain stationary in the middle of the stream.

“ What’s that for ? ” he asks himself, now more carefully examining the craft.

It is still full four hundred yards from him, but the moonlight being in his favour he makes it out to be a pair-oared skiff with two men in it.

“ They don’t seem to be dropping a net,” he observes, “ nor engaged about anything. That’s odd ! ”

Before they came to a stop he heard a murmur of voices, as of speech, a few words, exchanged between them, but too distant for him to distinguish what they had said. Now they are silent, sitting without stir ; only a slight movement in the arms of the oarsman to keep the boat in its place.

All this seems strange to him observing : not less when a flood of moonlight brighter than usual falls over the boat, and he can tell by the attitude of the man in the stern,

with face turned upward, that he is regarding the structure on the cliff.

He is not himself standing beside it now. Soon as becoming interested by the behaviour of the men in the boat, from its seeming eccentricity, he had glided back behind a bush, and there now crouches, an instinct prompting him to conceal himself.

Soon after he sees the boat moving on, and then for a few seconds it is out of sight, again coming under his view near the upper end of the islet, evidently setting in for the old channel. And while he watches, it enters!

As this is a sort of private way, the eyot itself being an adjunct of the ornamental grounds of Llangorren, he wonders whose boat it can be, and what its business there. By the backwash it must be making for the dock and stair; the men in it, or one of them, for the Court.

While still surprisedly conjecturing, his ears admonish him that the oars are at rest, and another stoppage has taken place. He cannot see the skiff now, as the high bank

hinders. Besides, the narrow passage is arched over by trees still in thick foliage; and, though the moon is shining brightly above, scarce a ray reaches the surface of the water. But an occasional creak of an oar in its rowlock, and some words spoken in low tone—so low he cannot make them out—tell him that the stoppage is directly opposite the spot where he is crouching—as predatory animal in wait for its prey.

What was at first mere curiosity, and then matter of but slight surprise, is now an object of keen solicitude. For of all places in the world, to him there is none invested with greater interest than that where the boat has been brought to. Why has it stopped there? Why is it staying? For he can tell it is by the silence continuing. Above all, who are the men in it?

He asks these questions of himself, but does not stay to reason out the answers. He will best get them by his eyes; and to obtain sight of the skiff and its occupants, he glides a little way along the cliff, look-

ing out for a convenient spot. Finding one, he drops first to his knees, then upon all fours, and crawls out to its edge. Craning his head over, but cautiously, and with a care it shall be under cover of some fern leaves, he has a view of the water below, with the boat on it—only indistinct on account of the obscurity. He can make out the figures of the two men, though not their faces, nor anything by which he may identify them—if already known. But he sees that which helps to a conjecture, at the same sharpening his apprehensions. The boat once more in motion, not moving off, but up into the little cove, where a dead body late lay! Then, as one of the men strikes a match and sets light to a lamp, lighting up his own face with that of the other opposite, he on the bank above at length recognizes both.

But it is no longer a surprise to him. The presence of the skiff there, the movements of the men in it—like his own, evidently under restraint and stealthy—have prepared him for seeing whom he now sees

—Captain Ryecroft and the waterman Wingate.

Still he cannot think of what they are after, though he has his suspicions; the place, with something only known to himself, suggesting them—conjecture at first soon becoming certainty, as he sees the ex-officer of Hussars rise to his feet, hold his lamp close to the cliff's face, and inspect the abrasions on the rock!

He is not more certain, but only more apprehensive, when the crushed juniper twigs are taken in hand, examined, and let go again. For he has by this divined the object of it all.

If any doubt lingered, it is set at rest by the exclamatory words following, which, though but muttered, reach him on the cliff above, heard clear enough—

“No accident—no suicide—murdered!”

They carry tremor to his heart, making him feel as a fox that hears the tongue of hound on its track. Still distant, but for all causing it fear, and driving it to think of subterfuge.

And of this thinks he, as he lies with his face among the ferns ; ponders upon it till the boat has passed back up the dark passage out into the river, and he hears the last light dipping of its oars in the far distance.

He even forgets a woman, for whom he was waiting at the summer-house, and who there without finding him has flitted off again.

At length rising to his feet, and going a little way, he too gets into a boat—one he finds, with oars aboard, down in the dock. It is not the *Gwendoline*—she is gone.

Seating himself on the mid thwart, he takes up the oars, and pulls towards the place lately occupied by the skiff of the waterman. When inside the cove he lights a match, and holds it close to the face of the rock where Ryecroft held his lamp. It burns out and he draws a second across the sand paper ; this to show him the broken branches of the juniper, which he also takes in hand and examines. Soon also dropping them, with a look of surprise, followed by the exclamatory phrases—

“Prodigiously strange! I see his drift now. Cunning fellow! On the track he has discovered the trick, and ’twill need another trick to throw him off it. This bush must be uprooted—destroyed.”

He is in the act of grasping the juniper to pluck it out by the roots. A dwarf thing, this could be easily done. But a thought stays him—another precautionary forecast, as evinced by his words—

“That won’t do.”

After repeating them, he drops back on the boat’s thwart, and sits for a while considering, with eyes turned toward the cliff, ranging it up and down.

“Ah!” he exclaims at length, “the very thing; as if the devil himself had fixed it for me! That *will* do; smash the bush to atoms—blot out everything, as if an earthquake had gone over Llangorren.”

While thus oddly soliloquising, his eyes are still turned upward, apparently regarding a ledge which, almost loose as a boulder, projects from the bank above. It is directly over the juniper, and if detached from its

bed, as it easily might be, would go crashing down, carrying the bush with it.

And that same night it does go down. When the morning sun lights up the cliff, there is seen a breakage upon its face just underneath the summer-house. Of course, a landslip, caused by the late rains acting on the decomposed sandstone. But the juniper bush is no longer there; it is gone, root and branch!

CHAPTER III.

REASONING BY ANALYSIS.

CAPTAIN RYECROFT's start at seeing a woman within the pavilion was less from surprise than an emotion due to memory. When he last saw his betrothed alive it was in that same place, and almost in a similar attitude—leaning over the baluster rail. Besides, many other souvenirs cling around the spot, which the sight vividly recalls; and so painfully that he at once turns his eyes away from it, nor again looks back. He has an idea who the woman is, though personally knowing her not, nor ever having seen her.

The incident agitates him a little; but he is soon calm again, and for some time after sits silent; in no dreamy reverie, but actively cogitating, though not of it or her. His thoughts are occupied with a disco-

very he has made in his exploration just ended. An important one, bearing on the suspicion he had conceived, almost proving it correct. Of all the facts that came before the coroner and his jury, none more impressed them, nor perhaps so much influenced their finding, as the tale-telling traces upon the face of the cliff. Nor did they arrive at their conclusion with any undue haste or light deliberation. Before deciding they had taken boat, and from below more minutely inspected them. But with their first impression unaltered—or only strengthened—that the abrasions on the soft sandstone rock were made by a falling body, and the bush borne down by the same. And what but the body of Gwendoline Wynn? Living or dead, springing off, or pitched over, they could not determine. Hence the ambiguity of their verdict.

Very different the result reached by Captain Ryecroft after viewing the same. In his Indian campaigns the ex-cavalry officer, belonging to the “Light,” had his share of

scouting experience. It enables him to read "sign" with the skill of trapper or prairie hunter; and on the moment his lamp threw its light against the cliff's face, he knew the scratches were not caused by anything that came *down*, since they had been *made from below*! And by some blunt instrument, as the blade of a boat oar. Then the branches of the juniper. Soon as getting his eyes close to them, he saw they had been broken *inward*, their drooping tops turned *toward* the cliff, not *from* it! A falling body would have bent them in an opposite direction, and the fracture been from the upper and inner side! Everything indicated their having been crushed from below; not by the same boat's oar, but likely enough by the hands that held it!

It was on reaching this conclusion that Captain Ryecroft gave involuntary utterance to the exclamatory words heard by him lying flat among the ferns above, the last one sending a thrill of fear through his heart.

And upon it the ex-officer of Hussars is still reflecting as he returns up stream.

Since the command given to Wingate to row him back, he has not spoken, not even to make remark about that suggestive thing seen in the summer-house above—though the other has observed it also. Facing that way, the waterman has his eyes on it for a longer time. But the bearing of the Captain admonishes him that he is not to speak till spoken to; and he silently tugs at his oars, leaving the other to his reflections.

These are: that Gwendoline Wynn has been surely assassinated: though not by being thrown over the cliff. Possibly not drowned at all, but her body dropped into the water where found—conveyed thither after life was extinct! The scoring of the rock and the snapping of the twigs, all that done to mislead; as it had misled everybody but himself. To him it has brought conviction that there has been a deed of blood—done by the hand of another. “No accident—no suicide—murdered!”

He is not questioning the fact, nor speculating upon the motive now. The last

has been already revolved in his mind, and is clear as daylight. To such a man as he has heard Lewin Murdock to be, an estate worth £10,000 a year would tempt to crime, even the capital one, which certainly he has committed. Ryecroft only thinks of how he can prove its committal—bring the deed of guilt home to the guilty one. It may be difficult, impossible; but he will do his best.

Embarked in the enterprise, he is considering what will be the best course to pursue—pondering upon it. He is not the man to act rashly at any time, but in a matter of such moment caution is especially called for. He is already on the track of a criminal who has displayed no ordinary cunning, as proved by that misleading sign. A false move made, or word spoken in careless confidence, by exposing his purpose, may defeat it. For this reason he has hitherto kept his intention to himself; not having given a hint of it to any one.

From Jack Wingate it cannot be longer

withheld, nor does he wish to withhold it. Instead, he will take him into his confidence, knowing he can do so with safety. That the young waterman is no prating fellow he has already had proof, while of his loyalty he never doubted.

First, to find out what Jack's own thoughts are about the whole thing. For since their last being in a boat together, on that fatal night, little speech has passed between them. Only a few words on the day of the inquest; when Captain Ryecroft himself was too excited to converse calmly, and before the dark suspicion had taken substantial shape in his mind.

Once more opposite the poplar he directs the skiff to be brought to. Which done, he sits just as when that sound startled him on return from the ball; apparently thinking of it, as in reality he is.

For a minute or so he is silent; and one might suppose he listened, expecting to hear it again. But no; he is only, as on the way down, making note of the distance to the Llangorren grounds. The

summer-house he cannot now see, but judges the spot where it stands by some tall trees he knows to be beside it.

The waterman observing him, is not surprised when at length asked the question,—

“Don’t you believe, Wingate, the cry came from above—I mean from the top of the cliff?”

“I’m a’most sure it did. I thought at the time it comed from higher ground still—the house itself. You remember my sayin’ so, Captain; and that I took it to be some o’ the sarvint girls shoutin’ up there?”

“I do remember—you did. It was not, alas! But their mistress.”

“Yes; she for sartin, poor young lady! We now know that.”

“Think back, Jack! Recall it to your mind; the tone, the length of time it lasted—everything. Can you?”

“I can, an’ do. I could all but fancy I hear it now!”

“Well; did it strike you as a cry that would come from one falling over the cliff—by accident or otherwise?”

“ It didn’t; an’ I don’t yet believe it wor—accydent or no accydent.”

“ No! What are your reasons for doubting it?”

“ Why, if it had been a woman eyther fallin’ over or flung, she’d a gied tongue a second time—aye, a good many times—’fore getting silenced. It must a been into the water; an’ people don’t drown at the first goin’ down. She’d a riz to the surface once, if not twice; an’ screeched sure. We couldn’t a helped hearin’ it. Ye remember, Captain, ’twor dead calm for a spell, just precedin’ the thunderstorm. When that cry come ye might a heerd the leap o’ a trout a quarter mile off. But it worn’t repeated—not so much as a mutter.”

“ Quite true. But what do you conclude from its not having been?”

“ That she who gied the shriek wor in the grasp o’ somebody when she did it, an’ wor silenced instant by bein’ choked or smothered; same as they say’s done by them scoundrels called garotters.”

“ You said nothing of this at the inquest? ”

“ No, I didn’t; for several reasons. One, I wor so took by surprise, just home, an’ hearin’ what had happened. Besides, the crowner didn’t question me on my feelins—only about the facts o’ the case. I answered all his questions, clear as I could remember, an’ far’s I then understood things. But not as I understand them now.”

“ Ah! You have learnt something since? ”

“ Not a thing, Captain. Only what I’ve been thinkin’ o’—by rememberin’ a circumstance I’d forgot.”

“ What? ”

“ Well; whiles I wor sittin’ in the skiff that night, waitin’ for you to come, I heerd a sound different from the hootin’ o’ them owls.”

“ Indeed! What sort of sound? ”

“ The plashing o’ oars. There wor sartin another boat about there, besides this one.”

“ In what direction did you hear them ? ”

“ From above. It must ha’ been that way. If’t had been a boat gone up from below, I’d ha’ noticed the stroke again, across the strip o’ island. But I didn’t.”

“ The same if one had passed on down.”

“ Just so ; an’ for that reason I now believe it wor comin’ down, an’ stopped ; somewhere just outside the backwash.”

An item of intelligence new to the Captain, as it is significant. He recalls the hour—between two and three o’clock in the morning. What boat could have been there but his own ? And if other, what its business ? ”

“ You’re quite sure there was a boat, Wingate ? ” he asks, after a pause.

“ The oars o’ one—that I’m quite sure o’. An’ where there’s smoke fire can’t be far off. Yes, Captain, there wor a boat about there. I’m willin’ to swear to it.”

“ Have you any idea whose ? ”

“ Well, no ; only some conjecters. First hearin’ the oar, I wor under the idea it might be Dick Dempsey, out salmon stealin.’

But at the second plunge I could tell it wor no paddle, but a pair of regular oars. They gied but two or three strokes, an' then stopped suddintly; not as though the boat had been rowed back, but brought up against the bank, an' there layed."

"You don't think it was Dick and his coracle, then?"

"I'm sure it worn't the coracle, but ain't so sure about its not bein' him. 'Stead, from what happened that night, an's been a' happenin' ever since, I b'lieve he wor one o' the men in that boat."

"You think there were others?"

"I do—leastways suspect it."

"And who do you suspect besides?"

"For one, him as used live up there, but's now livin' in Llangorren."

They have long since parted from the place where they made stop opposite the poplar, and are now abreast the Cuckoo's Glen, going on. It is to Glyngog House Wingate alludes, visible up the ravine, the moon gleaming upon its piebald walls and lightless windows—for it is untenanted.

“ You mean Mr. Murdock ? ”

“ The same, Captain. Though he worn’t at the ball, as I’ve heerd say—and might a’ know’d without tellin’—I’ve got an idea he beant far off when ’twor breakin’ up. An’ there wor another there, too, beside Dick Dempsey.”

“ A third ! Who ? ”

“ He as lives a bit further above.”

“ You mean—— ? ”

“ The French priest. Them three ain’t often far apart ; an’ if I beant astray in my recknin’, they were mighty close the-gither that same night, an’ nigh Llangorren Court. They’re all in, or about, it now—the precious tribang—an’ I’d bet big they’ve got footin there by the foulest o’ foul play. Yes, Captain ; sure as we be sittin’ in this boat, she as owned the place ha’ been murdered—the men as done it bein’ Lewin Murdock, Dick Dempsey, and the Roman priest o’ Rogues ! ”

CHAPTER IV.

A SUSPICIOUS CRAFT.

To the waterman's unreserved statement of facts and suspicions, Captain Ryecroft makes no rejoinder. The last are in exact consonance with his own already conceived, the first alone new to him.

And on the first he now fixes his thoughts, directing them to that particular one of a boat being in the neighbourhood of the Llangorren grounds about the time he was leaving them. For it, too, has a certain correspondence with something on the same night observed by himself—a circumstance he had forgotten, or ceased to think of; but now recalled with vivid distinctness. All the more as he listens to the conjectures of Wingate—about three men having been in that boat, and whom he supposed them to be.

The number is significant as corresponding with what occurred to himself. The time as well ; since, but a few hours before, he also had his attention drawn to a boat, under circumstances somewhat mysterious. The place was different ; for all not to contradict the supposition of the waterman—rather confirming it.

On his way to the Court—his black dress kerseymere protected by India-rubber overalls—Ryecroft, as known, had ridden to Wingate's house, and was thence rowed to Llangorren. His going to a ball by boat, instead of carriage or hotel hackney, was not for the sake of convenience, nor yet due to eccentricity. The prospect of a private interview with his betrothed at parting, as on former occasions expected to be pleasant, was his ruling motive for this arrangement. Besides, his calls at the Court were usually made in the same way ; his custom being to ride as far as the Wingate cott ge, leave his roadster there, and thence take the skiff. Between his town and the waterman's house there is a choice of routes, the main country

road keeping well away from the river, and a narrower one which follows the trend of the stream along its edge where practicable, but also here and there thrown off by meadows subject to inundations, or steep spurs of the parallel ridges. This, an ancient trackway now little used, was the route Captain Ryecroft had been accustomed to take on his way to Wingate's cottage, not from its being shorter or better, but for the scenery, which far excelling that of the other, equals any upon the Wyeseide. In addition, the very loneliness of the road had its charm for him; since only at rare intervals is house seen by its side, and rarer still living creature encountered upon it. Even where it passes Rugg's Ferry, there intersecting the ford road, the same solitude characterizes it. For this quaint conglomeration of dwellings is on the opposite side of the stream; all save the chapel, and the priest's house, standing some distance back from the bank, and screened by a spinney of trees.

With the topography of this plan he is

quite familiar; and now to-night it is vividly recalled to his mind by what the waterman has told him. For on that other night, so sadly remembered, as he was riding past Rugg's, he saw the boat thus brought back to his recollection. He had got a little beyond the crossing of the Ford road, where it leads out from the river—himself on the other going downwards—when his attention was drawn to a dark object against the bank on the opposite side of the stream. The sky at the time moonless he might not have noticed it, but for other dark objects seen in motion beside it—the thing itself being stationary. Despite the obscurity he could make them out to be men, busied around a boat. Something in their movements, which seemed made in a stealthy manner — too cautious for honesty—prompted him to pull up, and sit in his saddle observing them. He had himself no need to take precautions for concealment; the road at this point passing under old oaks, whose umbrageous branches, arcading over, shadowed the causeway,

making it dark around as the interior of a cavern.

Nor was he called upon to stay long there—only a few seconds after drawing bridle—just time enough for him to count the men, and see there were three of them—when they stepped over the sides of the boat, pushed her out from the bank, and rowed off down the river.

Even then he fancied there was something surreptitious in their proceedings; for the oars, instead of rattling in their rowlocks made scarce any noise, while their dip was barely audible, though so near.

Soon both boat and those on board were out of his sight, and the slight sound made by them beyond his hearing. Had the road kept along the river's bank he would have followed, and further watched them; but just below Rugg's it is carried off across a ridge, with steep pitch; and while ascending this, he ceased to think of them.

He might not have thought of them at all, had they made their embarkation at the

ordinary landing place, by the ford and ferry. There such a sight would have been nothing unusual, nor a circumstance to excite curiosity. But the boat, when he first observed it, was lying below—up against the bank by the chapel ground, across which the men must have come.

Recalling all this, with what Jack Wingate has just told him, connecting events together, and making comparison of time, place, and other circumstances, he thus interrogatively reflects :

“ Might not that boat have been the same whose oars Jack heard down below? And the men in it those whose names he has mentioned? Three of them—that at least in curious correspondence! But the time? About nine, or a little after, as I passed Rugg’s Ferry. That appears too early for the after event? No! They may have had other arrangements to make before proceeding to their murderous work. Odd, though, their knowing *she* would be out there. But they need not have known that—likely did not. More like they meant to

enter the house, after every one had gone away, and there do the deed. A night different from the common, every thing in confusion, the servants sleeping sounder than usual from having indulged in drink—some of them overcome by it, as I saw myself before leaving. Yes; it's quite probable the assassins took all that into consideration—surprised, no doubt, to find their victim so convenient—in fact, as if she had come forth to receive them! Poor girl!”

All this chapter of conjectures has been to himself, and in sombre silence; at length broken by the voice of his boatman, saying—

“You’ve come afoot, Captain; an’ it be a longish walk to the town, most o’ the road muddy. Ye’ll let me row you up the river—leastways for a couple o’ miles further? Then ye can take the footpath through Powell’s meadows.”

Roused as from a reverie, the Captain looking out, sees they are nearly up to the boatman’s cottage, which accounts for the

proposal thus made. After a little reflection he says in reply :—

“ Well, Jack ; if it wasn’t that I dislike over-working you——”

“ Don’t mention it ! ” interrupts Jack, “ I’ll be only too pleased to take you all the way to the town itself, if ye say the word. It a’nt so late yet, but to leave me plenty of time. Besides, I’ve got to go up to the Ferry anyhow, to get some grocery for mother. I may as well do it in the boat—’deed better than dragglin’ along them roughish roads.”

“ In that case I consent. But you must let me take the oars.”

“ No, Captain. I’d prefer workin’ em myself ; if it be all the same to you.”

The Captain does not insist, for in truth he would rather remain at the tiller. Not because he is indisposed for a spell of pulling. Nor is it from disinclination to walk, that he has so readily accepted the waterman’s offer. After reflecting, he would have asked the favour so courteously extended. And for a reason having nothing to

do with convenience, for the fear of fatigue ; but a purpose which has just shaped itself in his thoughts, suggested by the mention of the Ferry.

It is that he may consider this—be left free to follow the train of conjecture which the incident has interrupted—he yields to the boatman's wishes, and keeps his seat in the stern.

By a fresh spurt the *Mary* is carried beyond her mooring place ; as she passes it her owner for an instant feathering his oars and holding up his hat. It is a signal to one he sees there, standing outside in the moonlight—his mother.

CHAPTER V.

MATERNAL SOLICITUDE.

“THE poor lad ! His heart be sore sad ; at times most nigh breakin’ ! That’s plain—spite o’ all he try hide it.”

It is the Widow Wingate, who thus compassionately reflects—the subject her son.

She is alone within her cottage, the waterman being away with his boat. Captain Ryecroft has taken him down the river. It is on this nocturnal exploration, when the cliff at Llangorren is inspected by lamplight.

But she knows neither the purpose nor the place, any more than did Jack himself at starting. A little before sunset, the Captain came to the house, afoot and unexpectedly ; called her son out, spoke a few words to him, when they started away in the

skiff. She saw they went down stream—that is all.

She was some little surprised, though; not at the direction taken, but the time of setting out. Had Llangorren been still in possession of the young lady, of whom her son has often spoken to her, she would have thought nothing strange of it. But in view of the late sad occurrence at the Court, with the change of proprietorship consequent—about all of which she has been made aware—she knows the Captain cannot be bound thither, and therefore wonders whither. Surely, not a pleasure excursion, at such an unreasonable hour—night just drawing down?

She would have asked, but had no opportunity. Her son, summoned out of the house, did not re-enter; his oars were in the boat, having just come off a job; and the Captain appeared to be in haste. Hence, Jack's going off, without, as he usually does, telling his mother the why and the where.

It is not this that is now fidgeting her. She is far from being of an inquisitive turn

—least of all with her son—and never seeks to pry into his secrets. She knows his sterling integrity, and can trust him. Besides, she is aware that he is of a nature somewhat uncommunicative, especially upon matters that concern himself, and above all when he has a trouble on his mind—in short, one who keeps his sorrows locked up in his breast, as though preferring to suffer in silence.

And just this it is she is now bemoaning. She observes how he is suffering, and has been, ever since that hour when a farm labourer from Abergann brought him tidings of Mary Morgan's fatal mishap.

Of course she, his mother, expected him to grieve wildly and deeply, as he did; but not deeply so long. Many days have passed since that dark one; but since, she has not seen him smile—not once! She begins to fear his sorrow may never know an end. She has heard of broken hearts—his may be one. Not strange her solicitude.

“What make it worse,” she says, continuing her soliloquy, “he keep thinkin’

that he hae been partways to blame for the poor girl's death, by makin' her come out to meet him!"—Jack has told his mother of the interview under the big elm, all about it from beginning to end.—"That hadn't a thing to do wi' it. What happened wor ordained, long afore she left the house. When I dreamed that dream 'bout the corpse candle, I feeled most sure some-thin' would come o't; but then seein' it go up the meadows, I wor' althegither convinced. When *it* burn no human creetur' ha' lit it; an' none can put it out, till the doomed one be laid in the grave. Who could 'a carried it across the river—that night especial, wi' a flood lippin' full up to the banks? No mortal man, nor woman neyther!"

As a native of Pembrokeshire, in whose treeless valleys the *ignis fatuus* is oft seen, and on its dangerous coast cliffs, in times past, too oft the lanthorn of the smuggler, with the "stalking horse" of the inhuman wrecker, Mrs. Wingate's dream of the *canwyll corph* was natural enough—a legend-

ary reflection from tales told her in childhood, and wild songs chaunted over her cradle.

But her waking vision, of a light borne up the river bottom, was a phenomenon yet more natural; since in truth was it a real light, that of a lamp, carried in the hands of a man with a coracle on his back, which accounts for its passing over the stream. And the man was Richard Dempsey, who below had ferried Father Rogier across on his way to the farm of Abergann, where the latter intended remaining all night. The priest in his peregrinations, often nocturnal, accustomed to take a lamp along, had it with him on that night, having lit it before entering the coracle. But with the difficulty of balancing himself in the crank little craft he had set it down under the thwart, and at landing forgotten all about it. Thence the poacher, detained beyond time in reference to an appointment he meant being present at, had taken the shortest cut up the river bottom to Rugg's Ferry. This carried him

twice across the stream, where it bends by the waterman's cottage; his coracle, easily launched and lifted out, enabling him to pass straight over and on, in his haste not staying to extinguish the lamp, nor even thinking of it.

Not so much wonder, then, in Mrs. Wingate believing she saw the *canwyll corph*. No more that she believes it still, but less, in view of what has since come to pass; as she supposes, but the inexorable fiat of fate.

"Yes!" she exclaims, proceeding with her soliloquy; "I knowed it would come! Ah, me! it have come. Poor thing! I hadn't no great knowledge of her myself; but sure she wor a good girl, or my son couldn't a been so fond o' her. If she'd had badness in her, Jack wouldn't greet and grieve as he be doin' now."

Though right in the premises—for Mary Morgan was a good girl—Mrs. Wingate is unfortunately wrong in her deductions. But, fortunately for her peace of mind, she is so. It is some consolation to her to

think that she whom her son loved, and for whom he so sorrows, was worthy of his love as his sorrow.

It is wearing late, the sun having long since set; and still wondering why they went down the river, she steps outside to see if there be any sign of them returning. From the cottage but little can be seen of the stream, by reason of its tortuous course; only a short reach on either side, above and below.

Placing herself to command a view of the latter, she stands gazing down it. In addition to maternal solicitude, she feels anxiety of another and less emotional nature. Her tea-caddy is empty, the sugar all expended, and other household things deficient. Jack was just about starting off for the Ferry to replace them when the Captain came. Now it is a question whether he will be home in time to reach Rugg's before the shop closes. If not, there will be a scant supper for him, and he must grope his way lightless to bed; for among the spent commodities were candles,

the last one having been burnt out. In the widow Wingate's life candles seem to play an important part !

However, from all anxieties on this score she is at length and ere long relieved; her mind set at rest by a sound heard on the tranquil air of the night, the dip of a boat's oars, distant but recognizable. Often before listening for the same, she instinctively knows them to be in the hands of her son. For Jack rows with a stroke no waterman on the Wye has but he—none equalling it in *timbre* and regularity. His mother can tell it, as a hen the chirp of her own chick, or a ewe the bleat of its lamb.

That it is his stroke she has soon other evidence than her ears. In a few seconds after hearing the oars she sees them, their wet blades glistening in the moonlight, the boat between.

And now she only waits for it to be pulled up and into the wash—its docking place; when Jack will tell her where they have been, and what for; perhaps, too, the Captain will come inside the cottage and

speaking a friendly word with her, as he has frequently done.

While thus pleasantly anticipating, she has a disappointment. The skiff is passing onward—proceeding up the river! But she is comforted by seeing a hat held aloft—the salute telling her she is herself seen; and that Jack has some good reason for the prolongation of the voyage. It will no doubt terminate at the Ferry, where he will get the candles and comestibles, saving him a second journey thither, and so killing two birds with one stone.

Contenting herself with this construction of it, she returns inside the house, touches up the faggots on the fire, and by their cheerful blaze thinks no longer of candles, or any other light—forgetting even the *canwyll corph*.

CHAPTER VI.

A SACRILEGIOUS HAND.

BETWEEN Wingate's cottage and Rugg's Captain Ryecroft has but slight acquaintance with the river, knows it only by a glimpse had here and there from the road. Now, ascending by boat, he makes note of certain things appertaining to it—chiefly, the rate of its current, the windings of its channel, and the distance between the two places. He seems considering how long a boat might be in passing from one to the other. And just this is he thinking of: his thoughts on that boat he saw starting downward.

Whatever his object in all this, he does not reveal it to his companion. The time has not come for taking the waterman into full confidence. It will, but not to-night.

He has again relapsed into silence, which continues till he catches sight of an object

on the left bank, conspicuous against the sky, beside the moon's disc, now low. It is a cross surmounting a structure of ecclesiastical character, which he knows to be the Roman Catholic chapel at Rugg's. Soon as abreast of it he commands—

“Hold way, Jack! Keep her steady awhile!”

The waterman obeys without questioning why this new stoppage. He is himself interrogated the instant after—thus:—

“You see that shadowed spot under the bank—by the wall?”

“I do, Captain.”

“Is there any landing-place there for a boat?”

“None, as I know of. Course a boat may put in anywhere, if the bank beant eyther a cliff or a quagmire. The reg'lar landin' place be above—where the ferry punt lays.”

“But have you ever known of a boat being moored in there?”

The question has reference to the place first spoken of.

“I have, Captain ; my own. That but once, an’ the occasion not o’ the pleasantest kind. ’Twar the night after my poor Mary wor buried, when I comed to say a prayer over her grave, an’ plant a flower on it. I may say I stole there to do it ; not wishin’ to be obsarved by that sneak o’ a priest, nor any o’ their Romish lot. Exceptin’ my own, I never knew or heard o’ another boat bein’ laid along there.”

“All right ! Now on !”

And on the skiff is sculled up stream for another mile, with little further speech passing between oarsman and steerer ; it confined to subjects having no relation to what they have been all the evening occupied with.

For Ryecroft is once more in reverie, or rather silently thinking ; his thoughts concentrated on the one theme—endeavouring to solve that problem, simple of itself—but with many complications and doubtful ambiguities—how Gwendoline Wynn came by her death.

He is still absorbed in a sea of conjec-

tures, far as ever from its shore, when he feels the skiff at rest ; as it ceases motion its oarsman asking—

“Do you weesh me to set you out here, Captain? There be the right o’ way path through Powell’s meadows. Or would ye rather be took on up to the town? Say which you’d like best, an’ don’t think o’ any difference it makes to me.”

“Thanks, Jack ; it’s very kind of you, but I prefer the walk up the meadows. There’ll be moonlight enough yet. And as I shall want your boat to-morrow—it may be for the whole of the day—you’d better get home and well rested. Besides, you say you’ve an errand at Rugg’s—to the shop there. You must make haste, or it will be closed.”

“Ah! I didn’t think o’ that. Obleeged to ye much for remindin’ me. I promised mother to get them grocery things the night, and wouldn’t like to disappoint her—for a good deal.”

“Pull in, then, quick, and tilt me out! And, Jack! not a word to any one about

where I've been, or what doing. Keep that to yourself."

"I will—you may rely on me, Captain."

The boat is brought against the bank; Ryecroft leaps lightly to land, calls back "good night," and strikes off along the footpath.

Not a moment delays the waterman; but shoving off, and setting head down stream, pulls with all his strength, stimulated by the fear of finding the shop shut.

He is in good time, however; and reaches Rugg's to see a light in the shop window, with its door standing open.

Going in he gets the groceries, and is on return to the landing-place, where he has left his skiff, when he meets with a man, who has come to the Ferry on an errand somewhat similar to his own. It is Joseph Preece, "Old Joe," erst boatman of Llan-gorren Court; but now, as all his former fellow-servants, at large.

Though the acquaintance between him and Wingate is comparatively of recent date, a strong friendship has sprung up

between them—stronger as the days passed, and each saw more of the other. For of late, in the exercise of their respective *metiers*, professionally alike, they have had many opportunities of being together, and more than one lengthened “confab” in the *Gwendoline’s* dock.

It is days since they have met, and there is much to talk about, Joe being chief spokesman. And now that he has done his shopping, Jack can spare the time to listen. It will throw him a little later in reaching home; but his mother won’t mind that. She saw him go up, and knows he will remember his errand.

So the two stand conversing till the gossipy Joseph has discharged himself of a budget of intelligence, taking nigh half an hour in the delivery.

Then they part, the ex-Charon going about his own business, the waterman returning to his skiff.

Stepping into it, and seating himself, he pulls out and down.

A few strokes bring him opposite the

chapel burying-ground ; when all at once, as if stricken by a palsy, his arms cease moving, and the oar-blades drag deep in the water. There is not much current, and the skiff floats slowly.

He in it sits with eyes turned towards the graveyard. Not that he can see anything there, for the moon has gone down, and all is darkness. But he is not gazing, only thinking.

A thought, followed by an impulse leading to instantaneous action. A back stroke or two of the starboard oar, then a strong tug, and the boat's bow is against the bank.

He steps ashore ; ties the painter to a withy ; and, climbing over the wall, proceeds to the spot so sacred to him.

Dark as is now the night he has no difficulty in finding it. He has gone over that ground before, and remembers every inch of it. There are not many gravestones to guide him, for the little cemetery is of late consecration, and its humble monuments are few and far between. But he needs not their guidance. As a faithful dog by

instinct finds the grave of its master, so he, with memories quickened by affection, makes his way to the place where repose the remains of Mary Morgan.

Standing over her grave he first gives himself up to an outpouring of grief, heart-felt as wild. Then becoming calmer he kneels down beside it, and says a prayer. It is the Lord's—he knows no other. Enough that it gives him relief; which it does, lightening his overcharged heart.

Feeling better he is about to depart, and has again risen erect, when a thought stays him—a remembrance—"The flower of loves-bleeding."

Is it growing? Not the flower, but the plant. He knows the former is faded, and must wait for the return of spring. But the latter—is it still alive and flourishing? In the darkness he cannot see, but will be able to tell by the touch.

Once more dropping upon his knees, and extending his hands over the grave, he gropes for it. He finds the spot, but not the plant. It is gone! Nothing left of it

—not a remnant! A sacrilegious hand has been there, plucked it up, torn it out root and stalk, as the disturbed turf tells him!

In strange contrast with the prayerful words late upon his lips, are the angry exclamations to which he now gives utterance; some of them so profane as only under the circumstances to be excusable.

“It’s that d—d rascal, Dick Dempsey, as ha’ done it. Can’t a been anybody else? An’ if I can but get proof o’t, I’ll make him repent o’ the despicable trick. I will, by the livin’ G—!”

Thus angrily soliloquizing, he strides back to his skiff, and getting in rows off. But more than once, on the way homeward, he might be heard muttering words in the same wild strain—threats against Coracle Dick.

CHAPTER VII.

A LATE TEA.

MRS. WINGATE is again growing impatient at her son's continued absence, now prolonged beyond all reasonable time. The Dutch dial on the kitchen wall shows it to be after ten; therefore two hours since the skiff passed upwards. Jack has often made the return trip to Rugg's in less than one, while the shopping should not occupy him more than ten minutes, or, making every allowance, not twenty. How is the odd time being spent by him?

Her impatience becomes uneasiness as she looks out of doors, and observes the hue of the sky. For the moon having gone down it is now very dark, which always means danger on the river. The Wye is not a smooth swan pond, and, flooded or not, annually claims its victims

—strong men as women. And her son is upon it !

“Where?” she asks herself, becoming more and more anxious. He may have taken his fare on up to the town, in which case it will be still later before he can get back.

While thus conjecturing a tinge of sadness steals over the widow’s thoughts, with something of that weird feeling she experienced when once before waiting for him in the same way—on the occasion of his pretended errand after whipcord and pitch.

“Poor lad !” she says, recalling the little bit of deception she pardoned, and which now more than ever seems pardonable ; “he haint no need now deceivin’ his old mother that way. I only wish he had.”

“How black that sky do look,” she adds, rising from her seat, and going to the door ; “An’ threatenin’ storm, if I bean’t mistook. Lucky, Jack ha’ intimate acquaintance wi’ the river ’tween here and Rugg’s—if he haint goed farther. What a blessin’ the boy don’t gie way to drink, an’s otherways

careful ! Well, I 'spose there an't need for me feelin' uneasy. For all, I don't like his bein' so late. Mercy me ! Nigh on the stroke o' eleven ? Ha ! What's that ? Him I hope."

She steps hastily out, and behind the house, which fronting the road, has its back towards the river. On turning the corner she hears a dull thump, as of a boat brought up against the bank ; then a sharper concussion of timber striking timber—the sound of oars being unshipped. It comes from the *Mary*, at her mooring-place ; as, in a few seconds after, Mrs. Wingate is made aware, by seeing her son approach with his arms full—in one of them a large brown paper parcel, while under the other are his oars. She knows it is his custom to bring the latter up to the shed—a necessary precaution due to the road running so near, and the danger of larking fellows taking a fancy to carry off his skiff.

Met by his mother outside, he delivers the grocery goods and together they go in ;

when he is questioned as to the cause of delay.

“Whatever ha’ kep’ ye, Jack? Ye’ve been a wonderful long time goin’ up to the Ferry an’ back!”

“The Ferry! I went far beyond; up to the footpath over Squire Powell’s meadows. There I set Captain out.”

“Oh! that be it.”

His answer being satisfactory he is not further interrogated. For she has become busied with an earthenware teapot, into which have been dropped three spoonfuls of “Horniman’s” just brought home—one for her son, another for herself, and the odd one for the pot—the orthodox quantity. It is a late hour for tea; but their regular evening meal was postponed by the coming of the Captain, and Mrs. Wingate would not consider supper as it should be, wanting the beverage which cheers without intoxicating.

The pot set upon the hearthstone over some red-hot cinders, its contents are soon “mashed;” and, as nearly everything else

had been got ready against Jack's arrival, it but needs for him to take seat by the table, on which one of the new composite candles, just lighted, stands in its stick.

Occupied with pouring out the tea, and creaming it, the good dame does not notice anything odd in the expression of her son's countenance; for she has not yet looked at it, in a good light. Nor till she is handing the cup across to him. Then, the fresh lit candle gleaming full in his face, she sees what gives her a start. Not the sad melancholy cast to which she has of late been accustomed. That has seemingly gone off, replaced by sullen anger, as though he were brooding over some wrong done, or insult recently received!

"Whatever be the matter wi' ye, Jack?" she asks, the teacup still held in trembling hand. "There ha' something happened?"

"Oh! nothin' much, mother."

"Nothin' much! Then why be ye looking so black?"

"What makes you think I'm lookin' that way?"

“How can I help thinkin’ it? Why, lad; your brow be clouded, same’s the sky outside. Come, now tell the truth! Bean’t there somethin’ amiss?”

“Well, mother; since you axe me that way I will tell the truth. Somethin’ be amiss; or I ought better say, *missin’*.”

“Missin’! Be’t anybody ha’ stoled the things out o’ the boat? The balin’ pan, or that bit o’ cushion in the stern?”

“No it ain’t; no trifle o’ that kind, nor anythin’ stealed eyther. ’Stead a thing as ha’ been destroyed.”

“What thing?”

“The flower—the plant.”

“Flower! plant!”

“Yes; the Love-lies-bleedin’ I set on Mary’s grave the night after she wor laid in it. Ye remember my tellin’ you, mother?”

“Yes—yes; I do.”

“Well, it ain’t there now.”

“Ye ha’ been into the chapel buryin’ groun’ then?”

“I have.”

“ But what made ye go there, Jack ? ”

“ Well, mother; passin’ the place, I took a notion to go in—a sort o’ sudden inclinashun, I couldn’t resist. I thought that kneelin’ beside her grave, an’ sayin’ a prayer might do somethin’ to left the weight off o’ my heart. It would a done that, no doubt, but for findin’ the flower wan’t there. Fact, it had a good deal relieved me, till I discovered it wor gone.”

“ But how gone? Ha’ the thing been cut off, or pulled up ? ”

“ Clear plucked out by the roots. Not a vestige o’ it left ! ”

“ Maybe ’twer the sheep or goats. They often get into a graveyard; and if I bean’t mistook I’ve seen some in that o’ the Ferry Chapel. They may have ate it up ? ”

The idea is new to him, and being plausible, he reflects on it, for a time misled. Not long, however; only till remembering what tells him it is fallacious; this, his having set the plant so firmly that no animal could have uprooted it. A sheep or

goat might have eaten off the top, but nothing more.

“No, mother!” he at length rejoins; “it han’t been done by eyther; but by a human hand—I ought better to say the claw o’ a human tiger. No, not tiger; more o’ a stinkin’ cat!”

“Ye suspect somebody, then?”

“Suspect! I’m sure, as one can be without seein’, that bit o’ desecrashun ha’ been the work o’ Dick Dempsey. But I mean plantin’ another in its place, an’ watchin’ it too. If he pluck it up, an’ I know it, they’ll need dig another grave in the Rogue’s Ferry buryin’ groun’—that for receivin’ as big a rogue as ever wor buried there, or anywhere else—the d—— scounrel!”

“Dear Jack! don’t let your passion get the better o’ ye, to speak so sinfully. Richard Dempsey be a bad man, no doubt; but the Lord will deal wi’ him in his own way, an’ sure punish him. So leave him to the Lord. After all, what do it matter—only a bit o’ weed?”

“Weed! Mother, you mistake. That weed, as ye call it, wor like a silken string, bindin’ my heart to Mary’s. Settin’ it in the sod o’ her grave gied me a comfort I can’t describe to ye. An’ now to find it tore up brings the bitter all back again. In the spring I hoped to see it in bloom, to remind me o’ her love as ha’ been blighted, an’ like it lies bleedin’. But—well, it seems as I can’t do nothin’ for her now she’s dead, as I warn’t able while she wor livin’.”

He covers his face with his hands to hide the tears now coursing down his cheeks.

“Oh, my son! don’t take on so. Think that she be happy now—in Heaven. Sure she is, from all I ha’ heerd o’ her.”

“Yes, mother!” he earnestly affirms, “she is. If ever woman went to the good place, she ha’ goed there.”

“Well, that ought to comfort ye.”

“It do some. But to think of havin’ lost her for good—never again to look at her sweet face. Oh! that be dreadful!”

“Sure, it be. But think also that ye an’t the only one as ha’ to suffer. Nobody escape affliction o’ that sort, some time or the other. It’s the lot o’ all—rich folks as well as we poor ones. Look at the Captain, there! He be sufferin’ like yourself. Poor man! I pity him, too.”

“So do I, mother. An’ I ought, so well understandin’ how he feel, though he be too proud to let people see it. I seed it the day—several times noticed tears in his eyes, when we wor talkin’ about things that reminded him o’ Miss Wynn. When a soldier—a grand fightin’ soldier as he ha’ been—gies way to weepin’, the sorrow must be strong an’ deep. No doubt, he be ’most heart-broke, same’s myself.”

“But that an’t right, Jack. It isn’t intended we should always gie way to grief, no matter how dear they may a’ been as are lost to us. Besides, it be sinful.”

“Well, mother, I’ll try to think more cheerful; submittin’ to the will o’ Heaven.”

“Ah! There’s a good lad! That’s the way; an’ be assured Heaven won’t forsake,

but comfort ye yet. Now, let's not say any more about it. You an't eating your supper!"

"I han't no great appetite after all."

"Never mind; ye must eat, an' the tea'll cheer ye. Hand me your cup, an' let me fill it again."

He passes the empty cup across the table, mechanically.

"It be very good tea," she says, telling a little untruth for the sake of abstracting his thoughts. "But I've something else for you that's better—before you go to bed."

"Ye take too much care o' me, mother."

"Nonsense, Jack. Ye've had a hard day's work o't. But ye haint told me what the Captain tooked ye out for, nor where ye went down the river. How far?"

"Only as far as Llangorren Court."

"But there be new people there now, ye sayed?"

"Yes; the Murdocks. Bad lot both man an' wife, though he wor the cousin o' the good young lady as be gone."

“Sure, then, the Captain han’t been to visit them?”

“No, not likely. He an’t the kind to consort wi’ such as they, for all o’ their bein’ big folks now.”

“But there were other ladies livin’ at Llangorren. What ha’ become o’ they?”

“They ha’ gone to another house somewhere down the river—a smaller one it’s sayed. The old lady as wor Miss Wynn’s aunt ha’ money o’ her own, an’ the other be livin’ ’long wi’ her. For the rest there’s been a clean out—all the sarvints sent about their business; the only one kep’ bein’ a French girl who wor lady’s maid to the old mistress—that’s the aunt. She’s now the same to the new one, who be French, like herself.”

“Where ha’ ye heerd all this, Jack?”

“From Joseph Preece. I met him up at the Ferry, as I wor comin’ away from the shop.”

“He’s out too, then?” asks Mrs. Wingate, who has of late come to know him.

“Yes; same’s the others.”

“Where be the poor man abidin’ now?”

“Well; that’s odd, too. Where do you suppose, mother?”

“How should I know, my son? Where?”

“In the old house where Coracle Dick used to live!”

“What be there so odd in that?”

“Why, because Dick’s now in his house; ha’ got his place at the Court, an’s goin’ to be somethin’ far grander than ever he wor—head keeper.”

“Ah! poacher turned gamekeeper! That be settin’ thief to catch thief!”

“Somethin’ besides thief, he! A deal worse than that!”

“But,” pursues Mrs. Wingate, without reference to the reflection on Coracle’s character, “ye han’t yet tolt me what the Captain took down the river.”

“I an’t at liberty to tell any one. Ye understand me, mother?”

“Yes, yes; I do.”

“The Captain ha’ made me promise to say nothin’ o’ his doin’s; an’, to tell truth, I don’t know much about them myself.

But what I do know, I'm honour bound to keep dark consarnin' it—even wi' you, mother."

She appreciates his nice sense of honour ; and, with her own of delicacy, does not urge him to any further explanation.

"In time," he adds, "I'm like enough to know all o' what he's after. Maybe, the morrow."

"Ye're to see him the morrow, then ? "

"Yes ; he wants the boat."

"What hour ? "

"He didn't say when, only that he might be needin' me all the day. So I may look out for him early—first thing in the mornin'."

"That case ye must get to your bed at onest, an' ha' a good sleep, so's to start out fresh. First take this. It be the somethin' I promised ye—better than tea."

The something is a mug of mulled elderberry wine, which, whether or not better than tea, is certainly superior to port prepared in the same way.

Quaffing it down, and betaking himself

to bed, under its somniferous influence, the Wye waterman is soon in the land of dreams. Not happy ones, alas ! but visions of a river flood-swollen, with a boat upon its seething frothy surface, borne rapidly on towards a dangerous eddy—then into it—at length capsized to a sad symphony—the shrieks of a drowning woman !

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW MISTRESS OF THE MANSION.

AT Llangorren Court all is changed, from owner down to the humblest domestic. Lewin Murdock has become its master, as the priest told him he some day might.

There was none to say nay. By the failure of Ambrose Wynn's heirs—in the line through his son and bearing his name—the estate of which he was the original testator reverts to the children of his daughter, of whom Lewin Murdock, an only son, is the sole survivor. He of Glyngog is therefore indisputable heritor of Llangorren; and no one disputing it, he is now in possession, having entered upon it soon as the legal formularies could be gone through with. This they have been with a haste which causes invidious remark, if not actual scandal.

Lewin Murdock is not the man to care ; and, in truth, he is now scarce ever sober enough to feel sensitive, could he have felt so at any time. But in his new and luxurious home, waited on by a staff of servants, with wine at will, so unlike the days of misery spent in the dilapidated manor house, he gives loose rein to his passion for drink ; leaving the management of affairs to his dexterous better half.

She has not needed to take much trouble in the matter of furnishing. Her husband, as nearest of kin to the deceased, has also come in for the personal effects, furniture included ; all but some belongings of Miss Linton, which had been speedily removed by her—transferred to a little house of her own, not far off. Fortunately, the old lady is not left impecunious ; but has enough to keep her in comfort, with an economy, however, that precludes all idea of longer indulging in a lady's maid, more especially one so expensive as Clarisse ; who, as Jack Wingate said, has been dismissed from Miss Linton's establishment—

at the same time discharging herself by notice formally given. That clever *demoiselle* was not meant for service in a ten-roomed cottage, even though a detached one; and through the intervention of her patron, the priest, she still remains at the Court, to dance attendance on the *ancien belle* of Mabilie, as she did on the ancient toast of Cheltenham.

Pleasantly so far; her new mistress being in fine spirits, and herself delighted with everything. The French adventuress has attained the goal of an ambition long cherished, though not so patiently awaited. Oft gazed she across the Wye at those smiling grounds of Llangorren, as the Fallen Angel back over its walls into the Garden of Eden; oft saw she there assemblages of people to her seeming as angels, not fallen, but in highest favour—ah! in her estimation, more than angels—women of rank and wealth, who could command what she coveted beyond any far-off joys celestial—the nearer pleasures of earth and sense.

Those favoured fair ones are not there now, but she herself is; owner of the very Paradise in which they disported themselves! Nor does she despair of seeing them at Llangorren again, and having them around her in friendly intercourse, as had Gwendoline Wynn. Brought up under the *regime* of Louis and trained in the school of Eugenie, why need she fear either social slight or exclusion? True, she is in England, not France; but she thinks it is all the same. And not without some reason for so thinking. The ethics of the two countries, so different in days past, have of late become alarmingly assimilated—ever since that hand, red with blood spilled upon the boulevards of Paris, was affectionately clasped by a Queen on the dock-head of Cherbourg. The taint of that touch felt throughout all England, has spread over it like a plague; no local or temporary epidemic, but one which still abides, still emitting its noisome effluvia in a flood of prurient literature—novel writers who know neither decency nor shame—news-

paper scribblers devoid of either truth or sincerity — theatres little better than licensed *bagnios*, and Stock Exchange scandals smouching names once honoured in English history, with other scandals of yet more lamentable kind—all the old landmarks of England's morality being rapidly obliterated.

And all the better for Olympe, *née* Renault. Like her sort living by corruption, she instinctively rejoices at it, glories in the *monde immonde* of the Second Empire, and admires the abnormal monster who has done so much in sowing and cultivating the noxious crop. Seeing it flourish around her, and knowing it on the increase, the new mistress of Llangorren expects to profit by it. Nor has she the slightest fear of failure in any attempt she may make to enter Society. It will not much longer taboo her. She knows that, with very little adroitness, £10,000 a-year will introduce her into a Royal drawing-room—aye, take her to the steps of a throne; and none is needed to pass through the

gates of Hurlingham nor those of Chiswick's Garden. In this last she would not be the only flower of poisonous properties and tainted perfume ; instead, would brush skirts with scores of dames wonderfully like those of the Restoration and Regency, recalling the painted dolls of the Second Charles, and the Delilahs of the Fourth George ; in bold effrontery and cosmetic brilliance equalling either.

The wife of Lewin Murdock hopes ere long to be among them—once more a *célébrité*, as she was in the Bois de Boulogne, and the *bals* of the demi-monde.

True, the county aristocracy have not yet called upon her. For by a singular perverseness—unlike Nature's laws in the animal and vegetable world—the outer tentacles of this called “Society” are the last to take hold. But they will yet. Money is all powerful in this free and easy age. Having that in sufficiency, it makes little difference whether she once sat by a sewing machine, or turned a mangle, as she once has done in the Faubourg Montmartre for

her mother, *la blanchisseuse*. She is confident the gentry of the shire will in due time surrender, send in their cards and come of themselves; as they surely will, soon as they see her name in the *Court Journal* or *Morning Post*, in the list of Royal receptions:—"Mrs. Lewin Murdock, presented by the Countess of Devilacare."

And to a certainty they shall so read it, with much about her besides, if Jenkins be true to his instincts. She need not fear him—he will. She can trust his fidelity to the star scintillating in a field of plush, as to the Polar that of magnetic needle.

Her husband bears his new fortunes in a manner somewhat different; in one sense more soberly, as in another the reverse. If, during his adversity he indulged in drink, in prosperity he does not spare it. But there is another passion to which he now gives loose—his old, unconquerable vice—gaming. Little cares he for the cards of visitors, while those of the gambler delight him; and though his wife has yet received none of the former, he has his

callers to take a hand with him at the latter—more than enough to make up a rubber of whist. Besides, some of his old cronies of the “Welsh Harp,” who have now *entrée* at Llangorren, several young swells of the neighbourhood—the black sheep of their respective flocks—are not above being of his company. Where the carrion is the eagles congregate, as the vultures; and already two or three of the “leg” fraternity—in farther flight from London—have found their way into Herefordshire, and hover around the precincts of the Court.

Night after night, tables are there set out for loo, *écarté*, *rouge et noir*, or whatever may be called for—in a small way resembling the hells of Homburg, Baden, and Monaco—wanting only the women.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GAMBLERS AT LLANGORREN.

AMONG the faces now seen at Llangorren—most of them new to the place, and not a few of forbidding aspect—there is one familiar to us. Sinister as any; since it is that of Father Rogier. At no rare intervals may it be there observed; but almost continuously. Frequent as were his visits to Glyngog, they are still more so to Llangorren, where he now spends the greater part of his time; his own solitary, and somewhat humble, dwelling at Rugg's Ferry seeing nothing of him for days together, while for nights its celibate bed is unslept in: the luxurious couch spread for him at the Court having greater attractions.

Whether made welcome to this unlimited hospitality, or not, he comports himself as though he were; seeming noways backward

in the reception of it ; instead as if demanding it. One ignorant of his relations with the master of the establishment might imagine *him* its master. Nor would the supposition be so far astray. As the King-maker controls the King, so can Gregoire Rogier the new Lord of Llangorren—influence him at his will.

And this does he ; though not openly, or ostensibly. That would be contrary to the tactics taught him, and the practice to which he is accustomed. The sword of Loyola in the hands of his modern apostles has become a dagger—a weapon more suitable to Ultramontaniam. Only in Protestant countries to be wielded with secrecy, though elsewhere little concealed.

But the priest of Rugg's Ferry is not in France ; and, under the roof of an English gentleman, though a Roman Catholic, bears himself with becoming modesty—before strangers and the eyes of the outside world. Even the domestics of the house see nothing amiss. They are new to their places, and as yet unacquainted with the relationships

around them. Nor would they think it strange in a priest having control there or anywhere. They are all of his persuasion, else they would not be in service at Llangorren Court.

So proceed matters under its new administration.

* * * * *

On the same evening that Captain Rye-croft makes his quiet excursion down the river to inspect the traces on the cliff, there is a little dinner party at the Court; the diners taking seat by the table just about the time he was stepping into Wingate's skiff.

The hour is early; but it is altogether a bachelor affair, and Lewin Murdock's guests are men not much given to follow fashions. Besides, there is another reason; something to succeed the dinner, on which their thoughts are more bent than upon either eating or drinking. No spread of fruit, nor dessert of any kind, but a bout at card-playing, or dice for those who prefer it. On their way to the dining-room they have caught glimpse of another apartment where

whist and loo tables are seen, with all the gambling paraphernalia upon them—packs of new cards still in their wrappers, ivory counters, dice boxes with their spotted cubes lying alongside.

Pretty sight to Mr. Murdock's lately picked up acquaintances; a heterogeneous circle, but all alike in one respect—each indulging in the pleasant anticipation that he will that night leave his host's house with more or less of that host's money in his pocket. Murdock has himself come easily by it, and why should he not be made as easily to part with it? If he has a plethora of cash, they have a determination to relieve him of at least a portion of it.

Hence dinner is eaten in haste, and with little appreciation of the dishes, however dainty; all so longing to be around those tables in another room, and get their fingers on the toys there displayed.

Their host, aware of the universal desire, does nought to frustrate it. Instead, he is as eager as any for the fray. As said, gambling is his passion—has been for most

part of his life—and he could now no more live without it than go wanting drink. A hopeless victim to the last, he is equally a slave to the first. Soon, therefore, as desert is brought in, and a glass of the heavier wines gone round, he looks significantly at his wife—the only lady at the table—who, taking the hint, retires.

The gentlemen, on their feet at her withdrawal, do not sit down again, but drink standing—only a *petit verre* of cognac by way of “corrector.” Then they hurry off in an unseemly ruck towards the room containing metal more attractive; from which soon after proceed the clinking of coin and the rattle of ebony counters; with words now and then spoken not over nice, but rough, even profane, as though the speakers were playing skittles in the backyard of a London beerhouse, instead of cards under the roof of a country gentleman’s mansion!

While the new master of Llangorren is thus entertaining his amiable company—as much as any of them engrossed in the game—its new mistress is also playing a part,

which may be more reputable, but certainly is more mysterious. She is in the drawing-room, though not alone—Father Rogier alone with her. He, of course, has been one of the dining guests, and said an unctuous grace over the table. In his sacred sacerdotal character it could hardly be expected of him to keep along with the company; though he could take a hand at cards, and play them with as much skill as any gamester of that gathering. But just now he has other fish to fry, and wishes a word in private with the mistress of Llangorren, about the way things are going on. However much he may himself like a little game with its master, and win money from him, he does not relish seeing all the world do the same; no more she. Something must be done to put a stop to it; and it is to talk over this something the two have planned their present interview—some words about it having previously passed between them.

Seated side by side on a lounge, they enter upon the subject. But before a dozen

words have been exchanged they are compelled to discontinue, and for the time forego it.

The interruption is caused by a third individual, who has taken a fancy to follow Mrs. Murdock into the drawing-room; a young fellow of the squire class, but—as her husband late was—of somewhat damaged reputation and broken fortunes. For all having a whole eye to female beauty; which appears to him in great perfection in the face of the Frenchwoman—the rouge upon her cheeks looking the real rose-colour of that proverbial milk-maid nine times dipped in dew.

The wine he has been quaffing gives it this hue; for he enters half intoxicated, and with a slight stagger in his gait; to the great annoyance of the lady, and the positive chagrin of the priest, who regards him with scowling glances. But the intruder is too tipsy to notice them; and advancing invites himself to a seat in front of Mrs. Murdock, at the same time commencing a conversation with her.

Rogier, rising, gives a significant side look, with a slight nod towards the window ; then muttering a word of excuse saunters off out of the room.

She knows what it means, as where to follow and find him. Knows also how to disembarass herself of such as he who remained behind. Were it upon a bench of the Bois, or an arbour in the Jardin, she would make short work of it. But the ex-cocotte is now at the head of an aristocratic establishment, and must act in accordance. Therefore she allows some time to elapse, listening to the speech of her latest admirer ; some of it in compliments coarse enough to give offence to ears more sensitive than hers.

She at length gets rid of him, on the plea of having a headache, and going upstairs to get something for it. She will be down again by and by ; and so bows herself out of the gentleman's presence, leaving him in a state of fretful disappointment.

Once outside the room, instead of turning up the stair-way, she glides along the corri-

dor ; then on through the entrance-hall, and then out by the front door. Nor stays she an instant on the steps, or carriage sweep ; but proceeds direct to the summer-house, where she expects to find the priest. For there have they more than once been together, conversing on matters of private and particular nature.

On reaching the place she is disappointed—some little surprised. Rogier is not there ; nor can she see him anywhere around !

For all that, the gentleman is very near, without her knowing it—only a few paces off, lying flat upon his face among ferns, but so engrossed with thoughts, just then of an exciting nature, he neither hears her light footsteps, nor his own name pronounced. Not loudly though ; since, while pronouncing it, she feared being heard by some other. Besides, she does not think it necessary ; he will come yet, without calling.

She steps inside the pavilion, and there stands waiting. Still he does not come, nor sees she anything of him ; only a boat on

the river above, being rowed upwards. But without thought of its having anything to do with her or her affairs.

By this there is another boat in motion ; for the priest has meanwhile forsaken his spying place upon the cliff, and proceeded down to the dock.

“Where can Gregoire have gone?” she asks herself, becoming more and more impatient.

Several times she puts the question without receiving answer ; and is about starting on return to the house, when longer stayed by a rumbling noise which reaches her ears, coming up from the direction of the dock.

“Can it be he ? ”

Continuing to listen she hears the stroke of oars. It cannot be the boat she has seen rowing off above ? That must now be far away, while this is near—in the bye-water just below her. But can it be the priest who is in it ?

Yes, it is he ; as she discovers, after stepping outside, to the place he so late occupied, and looking over the cliff’s edge. For then

she had a view of his face, lit up by a lucifer match—itself looking like that of Lucifer!

What can he be doing down there? Why examining those things, he already knows all about, as she herself?

She would call down to him, and inquire. But possibly better not? He may be engaged upon some matter calling for secrecy, as he often is. Other eyes besides hers may be near, and her voice might draw them on him. She will wait for his coming up.

And wait she does, at the boat's dock, on the top step of the stair; there receiving him as he returns from his short, but still unexplained, excursion.

"What is it?" she asks, soon as he has mounted up to her, "*Quelque chose à tort?*"

"More than that. A veritable danger!"

"*Comment?* Explain!"

"There's a hound upon our track! One of sharpest scent."

"Who?"

"*Le Capitaine de hussards!*"

The dialogue that succeeds, between

Olympe Renault and Gregoire Rogier, has no reference to Lewin Murdock gambling away his money, but the fear of his losing it in quite another way. Which, for the rest of that night, gives them something else to think of, as also something to do.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNWILLING NOVICE.

“AM I myself? Dreaming? Or, is it insanity?”

It is a young girl who thus strangely interrogates. A beautiful girl, woman grown, of tall stature, with bright face and a wealth of hair, golden hued.

But what is beauty to her with all these adjuncts? As the flower born to blush unseen, eye of man may not look upon hers; though it is not wasting its sweetness on the desert air; but within the walls of a convent.

An English girl, though the convent is in France—in the city of Boulogne-sur-mer; the same in whose attached *pensionnat* the sister of Major Mahon is receiving education. She is not the girl, for Kate Mahon, though herself beautiful, is no blonde; instead, the very opposite. Besides, this

creature of radiant complexion is not attending school—she is beyond the years for that. Neither is she allowed the freedom of the streets, but kept shut up within a cell in the innermost recesses of the establishment, where the *pensionnaires* are not permitted, save one or two who are favourites with the Lady Superior.

A small apartment the young girl occupies—bedchamber and sitting-room in one—in short, a nun's cloister. Furnished, as such, are, in a style of austere simplicity; pallet bed along the one side, the other taken up by a plain deal dressing table, a washstand with jug and basin—these little bigger than tea-bowl and ewer—and a couple of common rush-bottom chairs—that is all.

The walls are lime-washed, but most of their surface is concealed by pictures of saints male and female; while the mother of all is honoured by an image, having a niche to itself, in a corner.

On the table are some four or five books, including a Testament and Missal; their bindings, with the orthodox cross stamped

upon them, proclaiming the nature of the contents.

A literature that cannot be to the liking of the present occupant of the cloister ; since she has been there several days without turning over a single leaf, or even taking up one of the volumes to look at it.

That she is not there with her own will but against it, can be told by her words, and as their tone, her manner while giving utterance to them. Seated upon the side of the bed, she has sprung to her feet, and with arms raised aloft and tossed about, strides distractedly over the floor. One seeing her thus might well imagine her to be, what she half fancies herself—insane ! A supposition strengthened by an unnatural lustre in her eyes, and a hectic flush on her cheeks unlike the hue of health. Still, not as with one suffering bodily sickness, or any physical ailment, but more as from a mind diseased. Seen for only a moment—that particular moment—such would be the conclusion regarding her. But her speech coming after tells she is in full possession of her

senses—only under terrible agitation—distracted with some great trouble.

“It must be a convent! But how have I come into it? Into France, too; for surely am I there? The woman who brings my meals is French. So the other—Sister of Mercy, as she calls herself, though she speaks my own tongue. The furniture—bed, table, chairs, washstand—everything of French manufacture. And in all England there is not such a jug and basin as those!”

Regarding the lavatory utensils—so diminutive as to recall “Gulliver’s Travels in Lilliput,” if ever read by her—she for a moment seems to forget her misery, as will in its very midst, and keenest, at sight of the ludicrous and grotesque.

It is quickly recalled, as her glance, wandering around the room, again rests on the little statue—not of marble, but a cheap plaster of Paris cast—and she reads the inscription underneath, “*La Mère de Dieu.*” The symbols tell her she is inside a nunnery, and upon the soil of France!

“Oh, yes!” she exclaims, “’tis certainly so! I am no more in my native land, but have been carried across the sea!”

The knowledge, or belief, does nought to tranquillise her feelings or explain the situation, to her all mysterious. Instead, it but adds to her bewilderment, and she once more exclaims, almost repeating herself,

“Am I myself? Is it a dream? Or have my senses indeed forsaken me?”

She clasps her hands across her forehead, the white fingers threading the thick folds of her hair which hangs dishevelled. She presses them against her temples, as if to make sure her brain is still untouched!

It is so, or she would not reason as she does.

“Everything around shows I am in France. But how came I to it? Who has brought me? What offence have I given God or man, to be dragged from home, from country—and confined—imprisoned! Convent, or whatever it be, imprisoned I am! The door constantly kept locked! That window, so high, I

cannot see over its sill ! The dim light it lets in telling it was not meant for enjoyment. Oh ! Instead of cheering it tantalises—tortures me !”

Despairingly she reseats herself upon the side of the bed, and with head still buried in her hands, continues her soliloquy ; no longer of things present, but reverting to the past.

“Let me think again ! What can I remember ? That night, so happy in its beginning, to end as it did ! The end of my life, as I thought, if I had a thought at that time. It was not, though, or I shouldn’t be here, but in heaven I hope. Would I were in heaven now ! When I recall *his* words—those last words and think——”

“Your thoughts are sinful, child !”

The remark, thus interrupting, is made by a woman, who appears on the threshold of the door, which she had just pushed open. A woman of mature age, dressed in a floating drapery of deep black—the orthodox garb of the Holy Sisterhood, with all its

insignia, of girdle, bead-roll, and pendant crucifix. A tall thin personage, with skin like shrivelled parchment, and a countenance that would be repulsive but for the nun's coif, which partly concealing, tones down its sinister expression. Withal, a face disagreeable to gaze upon; not the less so from its air of sanctity, evidently affected. The intruder is "Sister Ursule."

She has opened the door noiselessly—as cloister doors are made to open—and stands between its jambs, like a shadowy *silhouette* in its frame, one hand still holding the knob, while in the other is a small volume, apparently well thumbed. That she has had her ear to the keyhole before presenting herself is told by the rebuke having reference to the last words of the girl's soliloquy. in her excitement uttered aloud.

"Yes?" she continues, "sinful—very sinful! You should be thinking of something else than the world and its wickedness. And of anything before that you have been thinking of—the wickedness of all."

She thus spoken to had neither started at

the intrusion, nor does she show surprise at what is said. It is not the first visit of Sister Ursule to her cell, made in like stealthy manner; nor the first austere speech she has heard from the same skinny lips. At the beginning she did not listen to it patiently; instead, with indignation; defiantly, almost fiercely, rejoining. But the proudest spirit can be humbled. Even the eagle, when its wings are beaten to exhaustion against the bars of its cage, will become subdued, if not tamed. Therefore the imprisoned English girl makes reply, meekly and appealingly—

“Sister of Mercy, as you are called; have mercy upon me! Tell me why I am here?”

“For the good of your soul and its salvation.”

“But how can that concern any one save myself?”

“Ah! there you mistake, child; which shows the sort of life you’ve been hitherto leading; and the sort of people surrounding you; who, in their sinfulness, imagine

all as themselves. They cannot conceive that there are those who deem it a duty—nay, a direct command from God—to do all in their power for the redemption of lost sinners, and restoring them to his divine favour. He is all-merciful.”

“True: He is. I do not need to be told it. Only, who these redemptionists are that take such interest in my spiritual welfare, and how I have come to be here, surely I may know?”

“You shall in time, *ma fille*. Now you cannot—must not—for many reasons.”

“What reasons?”

“Well; for one, you have been very ill—nigh unto death, indeed.”

“I know that, without knowing how.”

“Of course. The accident which came so near depriving you of life was of that sudden nature; and your senses—but I mustn’t speak further about it. The doctor has given strict directions that you’re to be kept quiet, and it might excite you. Be satisfied with knowing, that they who have placed you here are the same who saved

your life, and would now rescue your soul from perdition. I've brought you this little volume for perusal. It will help to enlighten you."

She stretches out her long bony fingers, handing the book—one of those "Aids to Faith" relied upon by the apostles of the *Propaganda*.

The girl mechanically takes it, without looking at, or thinking of it; still pondering upon the unknown and mysterious benefactors, who, as she is told, have done so much for her.

"How good of them!" she rejoins, with an air of incredulity, and in tones that might be taken as derisive.

"How wicked of you!" retorts the other, taking it in this sense. "Positively ungrateful!" she adds, with the acerbity of a baffled proselytiser. "I am sorry, child, you still cling to your sinful thoughts, and keep up a rebellious spirit in face of all that is being done for your good. But I shall leave you now, and go and pray for you; hoping, on my next visit, to find you in a more proper frame of mind."

So saying, Sister Ursule glides out of the cloister, drawing to the door, and silently turning the key in its lock.

“O God!” groans the young girl in despair, flinging herself along the pallet, and for the third time interrogating, “am I myself, and dreaming? Or am I mad? In mercy, Heaven, tell me what it means!”

CHAPTER XI.

A CHEERFUL KITCHEN.

OF all the domestics turned adrift from Llangorren one alone interests us—Joseph Preece—"Old Joe," as his young mistress used familiarly to call him.

As Jack Wingate has made his mother aware, Joe has moved into the house formerly inhabited by Coracle Dick; so far changing places with the poacher, who now occupies the lodge in which the old man erewhile lived as one of the retainers of the Wynn family.

Beyond this the exchange has not extended. Richard Dempsey, under the new *regime* at Llangorren, has been promoted to higher office than was ever held by Joseph Preece; who, on the other hand, has neither turned poacher, nor intends doing so. Instead, the versatile Joseph,

as if to keep up his character for versatility, has taken to a new calling altogether—that of basket-making, with the construction of bird-cages and other kinds of wicker-work. Rather is it the resumption of an old business to which he had been brought up, but abandoned long years ago on entering the service of Squire Wynn. Having considerable skill in this textile trade, he hopes in his old age to make it maintain him. Only in part; for, thanks to the generosity of his former master, and more still that of his late mistress, Joe has laid by a little *pecunium*, nearly enough for his needs; so that, in truth, he has taken to the wicker-working less from necessity than for the sake of having something to do. The old man of many *metiers* has never led an idle life, and dislikes leading it.

Is it not by any accident he has drifted into the domicile late in the occupation of Dick Dempsey, though Dick had nothing to do with it. The poacher himself was but a week-to-week tenant, and of course

cleared out soon as obtaining his promotion. Then, the place being to let, at a low rent, the ex-Charon saw it would suit him; all the better because of a "withey bed" belonging to the same landlord, which was to let at the same time. This last being at the mouth of the dingle in which the solitary dwelling stands—and promising a convenient supply of the raw material for his projected manufacture—he has taken a lease of it along with the house.

Under his predecessor the premises having fallen into dilapidation—almost ruin—the old boatman had a bargain of them, on condition of his doing the repairs. He has done them; made the roof water-tight; given the walls a coat of plaster and white-wash; laid a new floor—in short, rendered the house habitable, and fairly comfortable.

Among other improvements he has partitioned off a second sleeping apartment, and not only plastered but papered it. More still, neatly and tastefully furnished it; the furniture consisting of an iron bed-

stead, painted emerald green, with brass knobs; a new washstand, and dressing table with mahogany framed glass on top, three cane chairs, a towel horse, and other etceteras.

For himself? No; he has a bedroom besides. And this, by the style of the plenishing, is evidently intended for one of the fair sex. Indeed, one has already taken possession of it, as evinced by some female apparel, suspended upon pegs against the wall; a pincushion, with a brooch in it, on the dressing table; bracelets and a necklace besides, with two or three scent bottles, and several other toilet trifles scattered about in front of the framed glass. They cannot be the belongings of "Old Joe's" wife, nor yet his daughter; for among the many parts he has played in life, that of Benedict has not been. A bachelor he is, and a bachelor he intends staying to the end of the chapter.

Who, then, is the owner of the brooch, bracelets, and other bijouterie? In a word, his niece—a slip of a girl who was under-

housemaid at Llangorren; like himself, set at large, and now transformed into a full-fledged housekeeper—his own. But before entering on parlour duties at the Court, she had seen service in the kitchen, under the cook; and some culinary skill, then and there acquired, now stands her old uncle in stead. By her deft manipulation, stewed rabbit becomes as jugged hare, so that it would be difficult to tell the difference; while she has at her fingers' ends many other feats of the *cuisine* that give him gratification. The old servitor of Squire Wynn is in his way a *gourmet*, and has a tooth for toothsome things.

His accomplished niece, with somewhat of his own cleverness, bears the pretty name of Amy—Amy Preece, for she is his brother's child. And she is pretty as her name, a bright blooming girl, rose-cheeked, with form well-rounded, and flesh firm as a Ribston pippin. Her cheerful countenance lights up the kitchen late shadowed by the presence and dark scowling features of Coracle Dick—brightens it

even more than the bran-new tin-ware or the whitewash upon its walls.

Old Joe rejoices ; and if he have a regret, it is that he had not long ago taken up housekeeping for himself. But this thought suggests another contradicting it. How could he while his young mistress lived? She so much beloved by him, whose many beneficences have made him, as he is, independent for the rest of his days, never more to be harassed by care or distressed by toil, one of her latest largesses, the very last, being to bestow upon him the pretty pleasure craft bearing her own name. This she had actually done on the morning of that day, the twenty-first anniversary of her birth, as it was the last of her life ; thus by an act of grand generosity commemorating two events so strangely, terribly, in contrast ! And as though some presentiment forewarned her of her own sad fate, so soon to follow, she had secured the gift by a scrap of writing ; thus at the change in the Llangorren household enabling its old boatman to claim the boat, and obtain it

too. It is now lying just below, at the brook's mouth by the withey bed, where Joe has made a mooring place for it. The handsome thing would fetch £50; and many a Wye waterman would give his year's earnings to possess it. Indeed, more than one has been after it, using arguments to induce its owner to dispose of it—pointing out how idle of him to keep a craft so little suited to his present calling!

All in vain. Old Joe would sooner sell his last shirt, or the newly-bought furniture of his house—sooner go begging—than part with that boat. It oft bore him beside his late mistress, so much lamented; it will still bear him lamenting her—aye for the rest of his life. If he has lost the lady he will cling to the souvenir, which carries her honoured name!

But, however, faithful the old family retainer, and affectionate in his memories, he does not let their sadness overpower him, nor always give way to the same. Only at times when something turns up more vividly than usual recalling Gwendoline

Wynn to remembrance. On other and ordinary occasions he is cheerful enough, this being his natural habit. And never more than on a certain night shortly after that of his chance encounter with Jack Wingate, when both were shopping at Rugg's Ferry. For there and then, in addition to the multifarious news imparted to the young waterman, he gave the latter an invitation to visit him in his new home ; which was gladly and off-hand accepted.

"A bit o' supper and a drop o' somethin' to send it down," were the old boatman's words specifying the entertainment.

The night has come round, and the "bit o' supper" is being prepared by Amy, who is acting as though she was never more called upon to practise the culinary art ; and, according to her own way of thinking, she never has been. For, to let out a little secret, the French lady's-maid was not the only feminine at Llangorren Court who had cast admiring eyes on the handsome boatman who came there rowing. Captain Ryecroft. Raising the curtain still higher,

Amy Preece's position is exposed ; she, too, having been caught in that same net, spread for neither.

Not strange then, but altogether natural. She is now exerting herself to cook a supper that will give gratification to the expected guest. She would work her fingers off for Jack Wingate.

Possibly the uncle may have some suspicion of why she is moving about so alertly, and besides looking so pleased like. If not a suspicion, he has a wish and a hope. Nothing in life, now, would be so much to his mind as to see his niece married to the man he has invited to visit him. For never in all his life has old Joe met one he so greatly cottons to. His intercourse with the young waterman, though scarce six months old, seems as if it had been of twice as many years ; so friendly and pleasant, he not only wants it continued, but wishes it to become nearer and dearer. If his niece be baiting a trap in the cooking of the supper, he has himself set that trap by the "invite" he gave to the expected guest.

A gentle tapping at the door tells him the trigger is touched ; and, responding to the signal, he calls out—

“ That you, Jack Wingate? O’ course it be. Come in ! ”

And in Jack Wingate comes.

CHAPTER XII.

QUEER BRIC-A-BRAC.

STEPPING over the threshold, the young waterman is warmly received by his older brother of the oar, and blushing by the girl, whose cheeks are already of a high colour, caught from the fire over which she has been stooping.

Old Joe, seated in the chimney corner, in a huge wicker chair of his own construction, motions Jack to another opposite, leaving the space in front clear for Amy to carry on her culinary operations. There are still a few touches to be added—a sauce to be concocted—before the supper can be served ; and she is concocting it.

Host and guest converse without heeding her, chiefly on topics relating to the bore of the river, about which old Joe is an oracle. As the other, too, has spent all his

days on Vaga's banks ; but there have been more of them, and he longer resident in that particular neighbourhood. It is too early to enter upon subjects of a more serious nature, though a word now and then slips in about the late occurrence at Llangoren, still wrapped in mystery. If they bring shadows over the brow of the old boatman, these pass off, as he surveys the table which his niece has tastefully decorated with fruits and late autumn flowers. It reminds him of many a pleasant Christmas night in the grand servants' hall at the Court, under holly and mistletoe, besides bowls of steaming punch and dishes of blazing snapdragon.

His guest knows something of that same hall ; but cares not to recall its memories. Better likes he the bright room he is now seated in. Within the radiant circle of its fire, and the other pleasant surroundings, he is for the time cheerful—almost himself again. His mother told him it was not good to be for ever grieving—not righteous, but sinful. And now, as he watches the

graceful creature moving about, actively engaged—and all on his account—he begins to think there may be truth in what she said. At all events his grief is more bearable than it has been for long days past. Not that he is untrue to the memory of Mary Morgan. Far from it. His feelings are but natural, inevitable. With that fair presence flitting before his eyes, he would not be man if it failed in some way to impress him.

But his feelings for Amy Preece do not go beyond the bounds of respectful admiration. Still is it an admiration that may become warmer, gathering strength as time goes on. It even does somewhat on this same night; for, in truth the girl's beauty is a thing which cannot be glanced at without a wish to gaze upon it again. And she possesses something more than beauty—a gift not quite so rare, but perhaps as much prized by Jack Wingate—modesty. He has noted her shy, almost timid mien, ere now; for it is not the first time he has been in her company—contrasted it with the bold

advances made to him by her former fellow-servant at the Court—Clarisse. And now, again, he observes the same bearing, as she moves about through that cheery place, in the light of glowing coals—best from the Forest of Dean.

And he thinks of it while seated at the supper table; she at its head, *vis-à-vis* to her uncle, and distributing the viands. These are no damper to his admiration of her, since the dishes she has prepared are of the daintiest. He has not been accustomed to eat such a meal, for his mother could not cook it; while, as already said, Amy is something of an *artiste de cuisine*. An excellent wife she would make, all things considered; and possibly at a later period, Jack Wingate might catch himself so reflecting. But not now; not to-night. Such a thought is not in his mind; could not be, with that sadder thought still overshadowing.

The conversation at the table is mostly between the uncle and himself, the niece only now and then putting in a word; and

the subjects are still of a general character, in the main relating to boats and their management.

It continues so till the supper things have been cleared off; and in their place appear a decanter of spirits, a basin of lump sugar, and a jug of hot water, with a couple of tumblers containing spoons. Amy knows her uncle's weakness—which is a whisky toddy before going to bed; for it is the “barley bree” that sparkles in the decanter; and also aware that to-night he will indulge in more than one, she sets the kettle on its trivet against the bars of the grate.

As the hour has now waxed late, and the host is evidently longing for a more confidential chat with his guest, she asks if there is anything more likely to be wanted.

Answered in the negative, she bids both “Good night,” withdraws to the little chamber so prettily decorated for her, and goes to her bed.

But not immediately to fall asleep. In-

stead she lies awake thinking of Jack Wingate, whose voice, like a distant murmur, she can now and then hear. The French *femme de chambre* would have had her cheek at the keyhole, to catch what he might say. Not so the young English girl, brought up in a very different school; and if she lies awake, it is from no prying curiosity, but kept so by a nobler sentiment.

On the instant of her withdrawal, old Joe, who has been some time showing in a fidget for it, hitches his chair closer to the table, desiring his guest to do the same; and the whisky punches having been already prepared, they also bring their glasses together."

"Yer good health, Jack."

"Same to yerself, Joe."

After this exchange the ex-Charon, no longer constrained by the presence of a third party, launches out into a dialogue altogether different from that hitherto held between them—the subject being the late tenant of the house in which they are hobnobbing.

“Queer sort ’o chap, that Coracle Dick! an’t he, Jack?”

“Course he be. But why do ye ask? You knowed him afore, well enough.”

“Not so well’s now. He never comed about the Court, ’ceptin’ once when fetched there—afore the old Squire on a poachin’ case. Lor! what a change! He now head keeper o’ the estate.”

“Ye say ye know him better than ye did? Ha’ ye larned anythin’ ’bout him o’ late?”

“That hae I; an’ a goodish deal too. More’n one thing as seems kewrous.”

“If ye don’t object tellin’ me, I’d like to hear what they be.”

“Well, one are, that Dick Dempsey ha’ been in the practice of somethin’ besides poachin’.”

“That an’t no news to me. I ha’ long suspected him o’ doin’s worse than that.”

“Amongst them did ye include forgin’?”

“No; because I never thought o’ it. But I believe him to be capable o’ it, or anything

whole o' the cat'logue. There be somethin' more to come."

"What more?" asks the young water-wan, suprisedly, and with renewed interest.

"A thing as seems kewrouser than all the rest. I can draw conclusions from the counterfeet coins, an' the house-breakin' implements; but the other beats me dead down, an' I don't know what to make o't. Maybe you can tell. I foun' it stuck up the same hole in the rocks, wi' a stone in front exact fittin' to an' fillin' its mouth."

While speaking, he draws open a chest, and takes from it a bundle of some white stuff—apparently linen—loosely rolled. Unfolding, and holding it up to the light, he adds:—

"Theer be the eydential article!"

No wonder he thought the thing strange, found where he had found it. For it is a *shroud*! White, with a cross and two letters in red stitched upon that part which, were it upon a body, both cross and lettering would lie over the breast!

"O God!" cries Jack Wingate, as his

eyes rest upon the symbol. "That's the shroud Mary Morgan wor buried in! I can swear to 't. I seed her mother stitch on that cross an' them letters—the ineetials o' her name. An' I seed it on herself in the coffin 'fore 't wor closed. Heaven o' mercy! what do it mean?"

Amy Preece, lying awake in her bed, hears Jack Wingate's voice excitedly exclaiming, and wonders what that means. But she is not told; nor learns she aught of a conversation which succeeds in more subdued tone; prolonged to a much later hour—even into morning. For before the two men part they mature a plan for ascertaining why that ghostly thing is still above ground instead of in the grave, where the body it covered is coldly sleeping!

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CHAPTER XIII.

A BRACE OF BODY-SNATCHERS.

WHAT with the high hills that shut in the valley of the Wye, and the hanging woods that clothe their steep slopes, the nights there are often so dark as to justify the familiar saying, "You couldn't see your hand before you." I have been out on some, when a white kerchief held within three feet of the eye was absolutely invisible; and it required a skilful Jehu, with best patent lamps, to keep carriage wheels upon the causeway of the road.

Such a night has drawn down over Rugg's Ferry, shrouding the place in impenetrable gloom. Situated in a concavity—as it were, at the bottom of an extinct volcanic crater—the obscurity is deeper than elsewhere; to-night alike covering the Welsh Harp, detached dwelling houses, chapel, and bury-

ing ground, as with a pall. Not a ray of light scintillates anywhere ; for the hour is after midnight, and everybody has retired to rest ; the weak glimmer of candles from cottage windows, as the stronger glare through those of the hotel-tavern, no longer to be seen. In the last every lamp is extinguished, its latest-sitting guest—if it have any guest—having gone to bed.

Some of the poachers and night-netters may be astir. If so they are abroad, and not about the place, since it is just at such hours they are away from it.

For all, two men are near by, seemingly moving with as much stealth as any trespassers after fish or game, and with even more mystery in their movements. The place occupied by them is the shadowed corner under the wall of the chapel cemetery, where Captain Ryecroft saw three men embarking on a boat. These are also in a boat ; but not one in the act of rowing off from the river's edge ; instead, just being brought into it.

Soon as its cutwater strikes against the

bank, one of the men, rising to his feet, leaps out upon the land, and attaches the painter to a sapling, by giving it two or three turns around the stem. Then facing back towards the boat, he says :—

“Hand me them things; an’ look out not to let ’em rattle !”

“Ye need ha’ no fear ’bout that,” rejoins the other, who has now unshipped the oars, and stowed them fore and aft along the thwarts, they not being the things asked for. Then, stooping down, he lifts something out of the boat’s bottom, and passes it over the side, repeating the movement three or four times. The things thus transferred from one to the other are handled by both as delicately, as though they were pheasant’s or plover’s eggs, instead of what they are—an ordinary set of grave-digger’s tools—spade, shovel, and mattock. There is, besides, a bundle of something soft, which, as there is no danger of its making noise, is tossed up to the top of the bank.

He who has flung follows it; and the two

gathering up the hardware, after some words exchanged in muttered tone, mount over the cemetery wall. The younger first leaps it, stretching back, and giving a hand to the other—an old man, who finds some difficulty in the ascent.

Inside the sacred precincts they pause; partly to apportion the tools, but as much to make sure that they have not hitherto been heard. Seen, they could not be, before or now.

Becoming satisfied that the coast is clear, the younger man says in a whisper—

“It be all right, I think. Every livin’ sinner—an’ there be a good wheen o’ that stripe ’bout here—have gone to bed. As for him, blackest o’ the lot, who lives in the house adjoinin’, ain’t like he’s at home. Good as sure down at Llangorren Court, where just now he finds quarters more comfortable. We hain’t nothin’ to fear, I take it. Let’s on to the place. You lay hold o’ my skirt, and I’ll gie ye the lead. I know the way, every inch o’ it.”

Saying which he moves off, the other doing as directed, and following step for step.

A few paces further, and they arrive at a grave ; beside which they again make stop. In daylight it would show recently made, though not altogether new. A month, or so, since the turf had been smoothed over it.

The men are now about to disturb it, as evinced by their movements and the implements brought along. But, before going further in their design—body-snatching, or whatever it be—both drop down upon their knees, and again listen intently, as though still in some fear of being interrupted.

Not a sound is heard save the wind, as it sweeps in mournful cadence through the trees along the hill slopes, and nearer below, the rippling of the river.

At length, convinced they have the cemetery to themselves, they proceed to their work, which begins by their spreading out a sheet on the grass close to and alongside the grave—a trick of body-stealers—so as to leave no traces of their theft. That done, they take up the sods with their hands, carefully, one after another ; and, with like care, lay them down upon the sheet, the

grass sides underneath. Then, seizing hold of the tools—spade and shovel—they proceed to scoop out the earth, placing it in a heap beside.

They have no need to make use of the mattock; the soil is loose, and lifts easily. Nor is their task as excavators of long continuance—even shorter than they anticipated. Within less than eighteen inches of the surface their tools come in contact with a harder substance, which they can tell to be timber—the lid of a coffin.

Soon as striking it, the younger faces round to his companion, saying—

“I tolt ye so—listen!”

With the spade’s point he again gives the coffin a tap. It returns a hollow sound—too hollow for aught to be inside it!

“No body in there!” he adds.

“Hadn’t we better keep on, an’ make sure?” suggests the other.

“Sartint we had—an’ will.”

Once more they commence shovelling out the earth, and continue till it is all cleared from the coffin. Then, inserting the blade

of the mattock under the edge of the lid, they raise it up; for it is not screwed down, only laid on loosely—the screws all drawn and gone!

Flinging himself on his face, and reaching forward, the younger man gropes inside the coffin—not expecting to feel any body there, but mechanically, and to see if there be aught else.

There is nothing—only emptiness. The house of the dead is untenanted—its tenant has been taken away!

“I know’d it!” he exclaims, drawing back. “I know’d my poor Mary wor no longer here!”

It is no body-snatcher who speaks thus, but Jack Wingate, his companion being Joseph Preece.

After which, the young waterman says not another word in reference to the discovery they have both made. He is less sad than thoughtful now. But he keeps his thoughts to himself, an occasional whisper to his companion being merely by way of direction, as they replace the lid upon the

coffin, cover all up as before, shake in the last fragments of loose earth from the sheet, and restore the grave turf—adjusting the sods with as much exactitude, as though they were laying tessellated tiles !

Then, taking up their tools, they glide back to the boat, step into it, and shove off.

On return down stream they reflect in different ways ; the old boatman of Llangorren still thinking it but a case of body-snatching, done by Coracle Dick, for the doctors—with a view to earning a dishonest penny.

Far otherwise the thoughts of Jack Wingate. He thinks, nay hopes—almost happily believes—that the body exhumed was not dead—never has been—but that Mary Morgan still lives, breathes, and has being !

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WANT OF HELP.

“DROWNED? No! Dead before she ever went under the water. Murdered, beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

It is Captain Ryecroft who thus emphatically affirms. And to himself, being alone, within his room in the Wyese Hotel; for he is still in Herefordshire.

More in conjecture, he proceeds—

“They first smothered, I suppose, or in some way rendered her insensible; then carried her to the place and dropped her in, leaving the water to complete their diabolical work? A double death as it were; though she may not have suffered its agonies twice. Poor girl! I hope not.”

In prosecuting the inquiry to which he has devoted himself, beyond certain unavoidable communications with Jack Wingate,

he has not taken any one into his confidence. This partly from having no intimate acquaintances in the neighbourhood, but more because he fears the betrayal of his purpose. It is not ripe for public exposure, far less bringing before a court of justice. Indeed, he could not yet shape an accusation against any one, all that he has learnt new serving only to satisfy him that his original suspicions were correct; which it has done, as shown by his soliloquy.

He has since made a second boat excursion down the bye-channel—made it in the day time, to assure himself there was no mistake in his observations under the light of the lamp. It was for this he had bespoken Wingate's skiff for the following day; for certain reasons reaching Llangorren at the earliest hour of dawn. There and then to see what surprised him quite as much as the unexpected discovery of the night before—a grand breakage from the brow of the cliff. But not any more misleading him. If the first "sign" observed

there failed to blind him, so does that which has obliterated it. No natural rock-slide, was the conclusion he came to, soon as setting eyes upon it; but the work of human hands! And within the hour, as he could see by the clods of loosened earth still dropping down and making muddy the water underneath; while bubbles were ascending from the detached boulder lying invisible below!

Had he been there only a few minutes earlier, himself invisible, he would have seen a man upon the cliff's crest, busy with a crowbar, levering the rock from its bed, and tilting it over—then carefully removing the marks of the iron implement, as also his own footprints!

That man saw him through the blue-grey dawn, in his skiff coming down the river; just as on the preceding night under the light of the moon. For he thus early astir and occupied in a task as that of Sisyphus, was no other than Father Rogier.

The priest had barely time to retreat and conceal himself, as the boat drew down to

the eyot. Not this time crouching among the ferns ; but behind some evergreens, at a farther and safer distance. Still near enough for him to observe the other's look of blank astonishment on beholding the *debâcle*, and note the expression change to one of significant intelligence as he continued gazing at it.

“ *Un limier veritable !* A hound that has scented blood, and's determined to follow it up, till he find the body whence it flowed. Aha ! The game must be got out of his way. Llangorren will have to change owners once again, and the sooner the better.”

At the very moment these thoughts were passing through the mind of Gregoire Rogier, the “veritable bloodhound” was mentally repeating the same words he had used on the night before : “No accident—no suicide—murdered !” adding, as his eyes ranged over the surface of red sandstone, so altered in appearance, “This makes me all the more sure of it. Miserable trick ! Not much Mr. Lewin Murdock will gain by it.”

So thought he then. But now, days after, though still believing Murdock to be the murderer, he thinks differently about the "trick." For the evidence afforded by the former traces, though slight, and pointing to no one in particular, was, nevertheless, a substantial indication of guilt against somebody; and these being blotted out, there is but his own testimony of their having ever existed. Though himself convinced that Gwendoline Wynn has been assassinated, he cannot see his way to convince others—much less a legal tribunal. He is still far from being in a position openly to accuse, or even name the criminals who ought to be arraigned.

He now knows there are more than one, or so supposes; still believing that Murdock has been the principal actor in the tragedy; though others besides have borne part in it.

"The man's wife must know all about it?" he says, going on in conjectural chain; "and that French priest—he probably the instigator of it? Aye! possibly had a hand

in the deed itself? There have been such cases recorded—many of them. Exercising great authority at Llangorren—as Jack has learned from his friend Joe—there commanding everybody and everything! And the fellow Dempsey—poacher, and what not—he, too, become an important personage about the place! Why all this? Only intelligible on the supposition that they have had to do with a death by which they have been all benefited. Yes; all four acting conjointly have brought it about!

“And how am I to bring it home to them? ’Twill be difficult, indeed, if at all possible. Even that slight sign destroyed has increased the difficulty.

“No use taking the ‘great unpaid’ into my confidence, nor yet the sharper stipendiaries. To submit my plans to either magistrate or policeman might be but to defeat them. ’Twould only raise a hue and cry, putting the guilty ones on their guard. That isn’t the way—will not do!

“And yet I must have some one to assist me. For there is truth in the old saw

‘Two heads better than one.’ Wingate is good enough in his way, and willing, but he can’t help me in mine. I want a man of my own class ; one who—stay ! George Shenstone ? No ! The young fellow is true as steel and brave as a lion, but—well, lacking brains. I could trust his heart, not his head. Where is he who has both to be relied upon ? Ha ! Mahon ! The man—the very man ! Experienced in the world’s wickedness, courageous, cool—except when he gets his Irish blood up against the Sas-senachs—above all devoted to me, as I know ; has never forgotten that little service I did him at Delhi. And he has nothing to do—plenty of time at his disposal. Yes ; the Major’s my man !

“ Shall I write and ask him to come over here. On second thoughts, No ! Better for me to go thither ; see him first, and explain all the circumstances. To Boulogne and back’s but a matter of forty-eight hours, and a day or two can’t make much difference in an affair like this. The scent’s cold as it can be, and may be taken up weeks

hence 's well as now. If we ever succeed in finding evidence of their guilt it will, no doubt, be mainly of the circumstantial sort; and much will depend on the character of the individuals accused. Now I think of it, something may be learnt about them in Boulogne itself; or at all events of the priest. Since I've had a good look at his forbidding face, I feel certain it's the same I saw inside the doorway of that convent. If not, there are two of the sacerdotal tribe so like it would be a toss up which is one and which t'other.

“In any case there can be no harm in my making a scout across to Boulogne, and instituting inquiries about him. Mahon's sister being at school in the establishment will enable us to ascertain whether a priest named Rogier holds relations with it, and we may learn something of the repute he bears. Perchance, also, a trifle concerning Mr. and Mrs. Lewin Murdock. It appears that both husband and wife are well known at Homburg, Baden, and other like resorts. Gaming, if not game, birds, in some of their

migratory flights they have made short sojourn at the French seaport, to get their hands in for those grander Hells beyond. I'll go over to Boulogne ! ”

A knock at the door. On the permission to enter, called out, a hotel porter presents himself.

“ Well ? ”

“ Your waterman, sir, Wingate, says he'd like to see you, if convenient ? ”

“ Tell him to step up ! ”

“ What can Jack be coming after ? Anyhow I'm glad he has come. 'Twill save me the trouble of sending for him ; as I'd better settle his account before starting off.” [Jack has a new score against the Captain for boat hire, his services having been retained, exclusively, for some length of time past.] “ Besides there's something I wish to say—a long chapter of instructions to leave with him. Come in, Jack ! ”

This, as a shuffling in the corridor outside, tells that the waterman is wiping his feet on the door mat.

The door opening, displays him ; but

with an expression on his countenance very different from that of a man coming to dun for wages due. More like one entering to announce a death, or some event which greatly agitates him.

“What is it?” asks the Captain, observing his distraught manner.

“Somethin’ queer, sir; very queer indeed.”

“Ah! Let me hear it!” demands Rye-croft, with an air of eagerness, thinking it relates to himself and the matter engrossing his mind.

“I will, Captain. But it’ll take time in the tellin’.”

“Take as much as you like. I’m at your service. Be seated.”

Jack clutches hold of a chair, and draws it up close to where the Captain is sitting—by a table. Then glancing over his shoulder, and all round the room, to assure himself there is no one within earshot, he says, in grave, solemn voice,

“I do believe, Captain, *she be still alive!*”

CHAPTER XV.

STILL ALIVE.

IMPOSSIBLE to depict the expression on Vivian Ryecroft's face, as the words of the waterman fall upon his ear. It is more than surprise—more than astonishment—intensely interrogative, as though some secret hope once entertained, but long gone out of his heart, had suddenly returned to it.

“Still alive!” he exclaims, springing to his feet, and almost upsetting the table. “Alive!” he mechanically repeats. “What do you mean, Wingate? And who?”

“My poor girl, Captain. You know.”

“*His* girl, not *mine*! Mary Morgan, not Gwendoline Wynn!” reflects Ryecroft within himself, dropping back upon his chair as one stunned by a blow.

“I’m almost sure she be still livin’,”

continues the waterman, in wonder at the emotion his words have called up, though little suspecting why.

Controlling it, the other asks, with diminished interest, still earnestly :—

“What leads you to think that way, Wingate? Have you a reason?”

“Yes, have I; more’n one. It’s about that I ha’ come to consult ye.”

“You’ve come to astonish me! But proceed!”

“Well, sir, as I ha’ sayed, it’ll take a good bit o’ tellin’, and a lot o’ explanation beside. But since ye’ve signified I’m free to your time, I’ll try and make the story short’s I can.”

“Don’t curtail it in any way. I wish to hear all!”

The waterman thus allowed latitude, launches forth into a full account of his own life—those chapters of it relating to his courtship of, and betrothal to, Mary Morgan. He tells of the opposition made by her mother, the rivalry of Coracle Dick, and the sinister interference of Father

Rogier. In addition, the details of that meeting of the lovers under the elm—their last—and the sad episode soon after succeeding.

Something of all this Ryecroft has heard before, and part of it suspected. What he now hears new to him is the account of a scene in the farm-house of Abergann, while Mary Morgan lay in the chamber of death, with a series of incidents that came under the observation of her sorrowing lover. The first, his seeing a shroud being made by the girl's mother, white, with a red cross, and the initial letters of her name braided over the breast: the same soon afterwards appearing upon the corpse. Then the strange behaviour of Father Rogier on the day of the funeral; the look with which he stood regarding the girl's face as she lay in her coffin; his abrupt exit out of the room; as afterwards his hurried departure from the side of the grave before it was finally closed up—a haste noticed by others as well as Jack Wingate.

“But what do you make of all that?” asks Ryecroft, the narrator having paused to gather himself for other, and still stranger revelations. “How can it give you a belief in the girl being still alive? Quite its contrary, I should say.”

“Stay, Captain! There be more to come.”

The Captain does stay, listening on. To hear the story of the planted and plucked up flower; of another and later visit made by Wingate to the cemetery in daylight, then seeing what led him to suspect, that not only had the plant been destroyed, but all the turf on the grave disturbed! He speaks of his astonishment at this, with his perplexity. Then goes on to give account of the evening spent with Joseph Preece in his new home; of the waifs and strays there shown him; the counterfeit coins, burglars' tools, and finally the shroud — that grim remembrancer, which he recognised at sight!

His narrative concludes with his action taken after, assisted by the old boatman.

“Last night,” he says, proceeding with the relation, “or I ought to say this same mornin’—for ’twar after midnight hour—Joe an’ myself took the skiff, an’ stole up to the chapel graveyard; where we opened her grave, an’ foun’ the coffin empty! Now, Captain, what do ye think o’ the whole thing?”

“On my word, I hardly know what to think of it. Mystery seems the measure of the time! This you tell me of is strange—if not stranger than any! What are your own thoughts about it, Jack?”

“Well, as I’ve already sayed, my thoughts be, an’ my hopes, that Mary’s still in the land o’ the livin’.”

“I hope she is.”

The tone of Ryecroft’s rejoinder tells of his incredulity, further manifested by his questions following.

“But you saw her in her coffin? Waked for two days, as I understood you; then laid in her grave? How could she have lived throughout all that? Surely she was dead!”

“So I thought at the time, but don’t now.”

“My good fellow, I fear you are deceiving yourself. I’m sorry having to think so. Why the body has been taken up again is of itself a sufficient puzzle; but alive—that seems physically impossible!”

“Well, Captain, it’s just about the possibility of the thing I come to ask your opinion; thinkin’ ye’d be acquainted wi’ the article itself.”

“What article?”

“The new medicine; it as go by the name o’ chloryform.”

“Ha! you have a suspicion——”

“That she ha’ been chloryformed, an’ so kep’ asleep—to be waked up when they wanted her. I’ve heerd say, they can do such things.”

“But then she was drowned also? Fell from a foot plank, you told me? And was in the water some time?”

“I don’t believe it, a bit. It be true enough she got somehow into the water, an’ wor took out insensible, or rather

drifted out o' herself, on the bank just below, at the mouth o' the brook. But that wor short after, an' she might still a' ben alive notwithstanding'. My notion be, that the priest had first put the chloryform into her, or did it then, an' knew all along she warn't dead, nohow."

"My dear Jack, the thing cannot be possible. Even if it were, you seem to forget that her mother, father—all of them—must have been cognizant of these facts—if facts?"

"I don't forget it, Captain. 'Stead I believe they all wor cognizant o' them—leastways, the mother."

"But why should she assist in such a dangerous deception—at risk of her daughter's life?"

"That's easy answered. She did it partly o' herself; but more at the biddin' o' the priest, whom she daren't disobey—the weak-minded creature most o' her time given up to sayin' prayers and paternosters. They all knowed the girl loved me, and wor sure to be my wife, whatever they

might say or do against it. Wi' her willin', I could a' defied the whole lot o' them. Bein' aware o' that their only chance wor to get her out o' my way by some trick—as they ha' indeed got her. Ye may think it strange their takin' all that trouble; but if ye'd seen her ye wouldn't. There worn't on all Wyeside so good lookin' a girl!"

Ryecroft again looks incredulous; not smilingly, but with a sad cast of countenance.

Despite its improbability, however, he begins to think there may be some truth in what the waterman says—Jack's earnest convictions sympathetically impressing him.

"And supposing her to be alive," he asks, "where do you think she is now? Have you any idea?"

"I have—leastways a notion."

"Where?"

"Over the water—in France—the town o' Bolone."

"Boulogne!" exclaims the Captain, with a start. "What makes you suppose she is there?"

"Something, sir, I han't yet spoke to ye about. I'd a'most forgot the thing, an' might never a thought o't again, but for what ha' happened since. Ye'll remember the night we come up from the ball, my tellin' ye I had an engagement the next day to take the young Powells down the river?"

"I remember it perfectly."

"Well; I took them, as agreed; an' that day we went down's fur's Chepstow. But they wor bound for the Severn side a duck shootin'; and next mornin' we started early, afore daybreak. As we were passin' the wharf below Chepstow Bridge, where there wor several craft lyin' in, I noticed one sloop-rigged ridin' at anchor a bit out from the rest, as if about clearin' to put to sea. By the light o' a lamp as hung over the taffrail, I read the name on her starn, showin' she wor French, an' belonged to Bolone. I shouldn't ha' thought that anythin' odd, as there be many foreign craft o' the smaller kind puts in at Chepstow. But what did appear odd, an' gied me a start

too, wor my seein' a boat by the sloop's side wi' a man in it, who I could a'most swore'd wor the Rogue's Ferry priest. There wor others in the boat besides, an' they appeared to be gettin' some sort o' bundle out o' it, an' takin' it up the manropes, aboard o' the sloop. But I didn't see any more, as we soon passed out o' sight, goin' on down. Now, Captain, it's my firm belief that man must ha' been the priest, and that thing, I supposed to be a bundle o' marchandise, neyther more nor less than the body o' Mary Morgan—not dead, but livin' ! ”

“ You astound me, Wingate ! Certainly a most singular circumstance ! Coincidence too ! Boulogne—Boulogne ! ”

“ Yes, Captain ; by the letterin' on her starn the sloop must ha' belonged there ; an' *I'm goin' there myself.* ”

“ I too, Jack ! We shall go together ! ”

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRANGE FATHER CONFESSOR.

“He’s gone away—given it up! Be glad, madame!”

Father Rogier so speaks on entering the drawing-room of Llangorren Court, where Mrs. Murdock is seated.

“What, Gregoire?”—were her husband present it would be “Père;” but she is alone—“Who’s gone away? And why am I to rejoice?”

“*Le Capitaine.*”

“Ha!” she ejaculates, with a pleased look, showing that the two words have answered all her questions in one.

“Are you sure of it? The news seems too good for truth.”

“It’s true, nevertheless; so far as his having gone away. Whether to stay away is another matter. We must hope he will.”

“I hope it with all my heart.”

“And well you may, madame; as I myself. We had more to fear from that *chien de chasse* than all the rest of the pack—ay, have still, unless he’s found the scent too cold, and in despair abandoned the pursuit; which I fancy he has, thrown off by that little rock slide. A lucky chance my having caught him at his reconnaissance; and rather a clever bit of strategy so to baffle him! Wasn’t it, *chère*?”

“Superb! The whole thing from beginning to end! You’ve proved yourself a wonderful man, Gregoire Rogier.”

“And I hope worthy of Olympe Renault?”

“You have.”

“*Merci!* So far that’s satisfactory; and your slave feels he has not been toiling in vain. But there’s a good deal more to be done before we can take our ship safe into port. And it must be done quickly, too. I pine to cast off this priestly garb—in which I’ve been so long miserably masquerading—and enter into the real enjoyments

of life. But there's another, and more potent reason, for using despatch ; breakers around us, on which we may be wrecked, ruined any day—any hour. Le Capitaine Ryecroft was not, or is not, the only one."

"Richard—*le braconnier*—you're thinking of?"

"No, no, no ! Of him we needn't have the slightest fear. I hold his lips sealed, by a rope around his neck ; whose noose I can draw tight at the shortest notice. I am far more apprehensive of Monsieur, *votre mari !*"

"In what way?"

"More than one ; but for one, his tongue. There's no knowing what a drunken man may do or say in his cups ; and Monsieur Murdock is hardly ever out of them. Suppose he gets to babbling, and lets drop something about—well, I needn't say what. There's still suspicion abroad—plenty of it,—and like a spark applied to tinder, a word would set it ablaze."

C'est vrai !"

“ Fortunately, Mademoiselle had no very near relatives of the male sex, nor any one much interested in her fate, save the *fiancé* and the other lover—the rustic and rejected one—Shenstone *fil's*. Of him we need take no account. Even if suspicious, he hasn't the craft to unravel a clue so cunningly rolled as ours; and for the *ancien hussard*, let us hope he has yielded to despair, and gone back whence he came. Luck too, in his having no intimacies here, or I believe anywhere in the shire of Hereford. Had it been otherwise, we might not so easily have got disembarassed of him.”

“ And you do think he has gone for good?”

“ I do; at least it would seem so. On his second return to the hotel—in haste as it was—he had little luggage; and that he has all taken away with him. So I learnt from one of the hotel people, who professes our faith. Further, at the railway station, that he took ticket for London. Of course that means nothing. He may be *en route* for anywhere beyond—round the globe, if

he feel inclined to circumnavigation. And I shall be delighted if he do."

He would not be much delighted had he heard at the railway station of what actually occurred—that in getting his ticket Captain Ryecroft had inquired whether he could not be booked through for Boulogne. Still less might Father Rogier have felt gratification to know, that there were two tickets taken for London; a first-class for the Captain himself, and a second for the waterman Wingate—travelling together, though in separate carriages, as befitted their different rank in life.

Having heard nothing of this, the sham priest—as he has now acknowledged himself—is jubilant at the thought that another hostile pawn in the game he has been so skilfully playing has disappeared from the chess-board. In short, all have been knocked over, queen, bishops, knights, and castles. Alone the king stands, he tottering; for Lewin Murdock is fast drinking himself to death. It is of him the priest speaks as king:—

“Has he signed the will?”

“*Oui.*”

“When?”

“This morning, before he went out. The lawyer who drew it up came, with his clerk to witness——”

“I know all that,” interrupts the priest, “as I should, having sent them. Let me have a look at the document. You have it in the house, I hope?”

“In my hand,” she answers, diving into a drawer of the table by which she sits, and drawing forth a folded sheet of parchment; “*Le voilà!*”

She spreads it out, not to read what is written upon it, only to look at the signatures, and see they are right. Well knows he every word of that will, he himself having dictated it. A testament made by Lewin Murdock, which, at his death, leaves the Llangorren estate—as sole owner and last in tail he having the right so to dispose of it—to his wife Olympe—*née* Renault—for her life; then to his children, should there be any surviving; failing such,

to Gregoire Rogier, Priest of the Roman Catholic Church; and in the event of his demise preceding that of the other heirs hereinbefore mentioned, the estate, or what remains of it, to become the property of the Convent of——, Boulogne-sur-mer, France.

“For that last clause, which is yours, Gregoire, the nuns of Boulogne should be grateful to you, or at all events, the abbess, Lady Superior, or whatever she’s called.”

“So she will,” he rejoins with a dry laugh, “when she gets the property so conveyed. Unfortunately for her the reversion is rather distant, and having to pass through so many hands there may be no great deal left of it, on coming into hers. Nay!” he adds in exclamation, his jocular tone suddenly changing to the serious, “if some step be not taken to put a stop to what’s going on, there won’t be much of the Llangorren estate left for any one—not even for yourself, madame. Under the fingers of Monsieur, with the cards in them, it’s being melted down as snow on the sunny

side of a hill. Even at this self-same moment it may be going off in large slices—avalanches!”

“*Mon Dieu!*” she exclaims, with an alarmed air, quite comprehending the danger thus figuratively portrayed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he continues, “if to-day he were made a thousand pounds the poorer. When I left the Ferry he was in the Welsh Harp, as I was told, tossing sovereigns upon its bar counter, ‘Heads and tails, who wins?’ Not he, you may be sure. No doubt he’s now at a gaming-table inside, engaged with that gang of sharpers who have lately got around him, staking large sums on every turn of the cards—Jews’ eyes, ponies, and monkeys, as these *chevaliers d’industrie* facetiously term their money. If we don’t bring all this to a termination, that will you have in your hand won’t be worth the price of the parchment it’s written upon. *Comprenez-vous, chère?*”

“*Parfaitement!* But how is it to be brought to a termination. For myself I

haven't an idea. Has any occurred to you, Gregoire?"

As the ex-courtesan asks the question, she leans across the little table, and looks the false priest straight in the face. He knows the bent of her inquiry, told it by the tone and manner in which it has been put—both significant of something more than the words might otherwise convey. Still he does not answer it directly. Even between these two fiends in human form, despite their mutual understanding of each other's wickedness, and the little reason either has for concealing it, there is a sort of intuitive reticence upon the matter which is in the minds of both. For it is murder—the murder of Lewin Murdock!

“*Le pauvre homme!*” ejaculates the man, with a pretence at compassionating, under the circumstances ludicrous. “The cognac is killin’ him, not by inches, but ells; and I don’t believe he can last much longer. It seems but a question of weeks; may be only days. Thanks to the school in which

I was trained, I have sufficient medical knowledge to prognosticate that."

A gleam as of delight passes over the face of the woman—an expression almost demoniacal; for it is a wife hearing this about her husband!

"You think only *days*?" she asks, with an eagerness as if apprehensive about that husband's health. But the tone tells different, as the hungry look in her eye while awaiting the answer. Both proclaim she wishes it in the affirmative; as it is.

"Only days!" he says, as if his voice were an echo. "Still days count in a thing of this kind—aye, even hours. Who knows but that in a fit of drunken bravado he may stake the whole estate on a single turn of cards or cast of dice? Others have done the like before now—gentlemen grander than he, with titles to their names—rich in one hour, beggars in the next. I can remember more than one."

"Ah! so can I."

"Englishmen, too; who usually wind up such matters by putting a pistol to their

heads, and blowing out their brains. True, Monsieur hasn't any much to blow out; but that isn't a question which affects us—myself as well as you. I've risked everything—reputation, which I care least about, if the affair can be brought to a proper conclusion; but should it fail, then—I need not tell you. What we've done, if known, would soon make us acquainted with the inside of an English gaol. Monsieur, throwing away his money in this reckless fashion must be restrained, or he'll bring ruin to all of us. Therefore some steps must be taken to restrain him, and promptly."

"*Vraiment!* I ask you again—have you thought of anything, Gregoire?"

He does not make immediate answer, but seems to ponder over, or hang back upon it. When at length given it is itself an interrogation, apparently unconnected with what they have been speaking about.

"Would it greatly surprise you, if to-night your husband didn't come home to you?"

“Certainly not—in the least. Why should it? It wouldn’t be the first time by scores—hundreds—for him to stay all night away from me. Aye, and at that same Welsh Harp, too—many’s the night.”

“To your great annoyance, no doubt; if it did not make you dreadfully jealous?”

She breaks out into a laugh, hollow and heartless, as was ever heard in an *allée* of the Jardin Mabille. When it is ended she adds gravely :—

“The time was when he might have made me so; I may as well admit that. Not now, as you know, Gregoire. Now, instead of feeling annoyed by it, I’d only be too glad to think I should never see his face again. *Le brute ivrogne!*”

To this monstrous declaration Rogier laconically rejoins :—

“You may not.” Then placing his lips close to her ear, he adds in a whisper, “If all prosper, as planned, *you will not!*”

She neither starts, nor seeks to inquire further. She knows he has conceived some

scheme to disembarrass her of a husband, she no longer cares for, to both become inconvenient. And from what has gone before, she can rely on Rogier with its execution.

CHAPTER XVII.

A QUEER CATECHIST.

A BOAT upon the Wye, being pulled upward, between Llangorren Court and Rugg's Ferry. There are two men in it, not Vivian Ryecroft and Jack Wingate, but Gregoire Rogier and Richard Dempsey.

The *ci-devant* poacher is at the oars; for in addition to his new post as gamekeeper, he has occasional charge of a skiff, which has replaced the *Guendoline*. This same morning he rowed his master up to Rugg's, leaving him there; and now, at night, he is on return to fetch him home.

The two places being on opposite sides of the river, and the road round about, besides difficult for wheeled vehicles, Lewin Murdock moreover an indifferent horseman, he prefers the water route, and often takes it, as he has done to-day.

It is the same on which Father Rogier held that dialogue of sinister innuendo with Madame, and the priest, aware of the boat having to return to the Ferry, avails himself of a seat in it. Not that he dislikes walking, or is compelled to it. For he now keeps a cob, and does his roundson horseback. But on this particular day he has left his roadster in its stable, and gone down to Llangorren afoot, knowing there would be the skiff to take him back.

No scheme of mere convenience dictated this arrangement to Gregoire Rogier. Instead, one of Satanic wickedness, pre-conceived, and all settled before holding that *tête-à-tête* with her he has called "chérie."

Though requiring a boat for its execution and an oarsman of a peculiar kind—adroit at something besides the handling of oars—not a word of it has yet been imparted to the one who is rowing him. For all, the ex-poacher, accustomed to the priest's moods, and familiar with his ways, can see there is something unusual in his mind,

and that he himself is on the eve of being called upon for some new service or sacrifice. No supply of poached fish or game. Things have gone higher than that, and he anticipates some demand of a more serious nature. Still he has not the most distant idea of what it is to be; though certain interrogatories put to him are evidently leading up to it. The first is—

“You’re not afraid of water, are you, Dick?”

“Not partickler, your Reverence. Why should I?”

“Well, your being so little in the habit of washing your face—if I am right in my reckoning, only once a week—may plead my excuse for asking the question.”

“Oh, Father Rogier! That wor only in the time past, when I lived alone, and the thing worn’t worth while. Now, going more into respectable company, I do a little washin’ every day.”

“I’m glad to hear of your improved habits, and that they keep pace with the promotion you’ve had. But my inquiry

had no reference to your ablutions ; rather to your capabilities as a swimmer. If I mistake not, you can swim like a fish ?”

“No, not equal to a fish. That ain’t possible.”

“An otter, then ?”

“Somethin’ nearer he, if ye like,” answers Coracle, laughingly.

“I supposed as much. Never mind. About the degree of your natatory powers we needn’t dispute. I take it they’re sufficient for reaching either bank of this river, supposing the skiff to get capsized and you in it ?”

“Lor, Father Rogier ! That wouldn’t be nothin’ ! I could swim to eyther shore, if ’twor miles off.”

“But could you as you are now—with clothes on, boots, and everything ?”

“Sartin could I, and carry weight beside.”

“That will do,” rejoins the questioner, apparently satisfied. Then lapsing into silence, and leaving Dick in a very desert

of conjectures why he has been so interrogated.

The speechless interregnum is not for long. After a minute or two, Rogier, as if freshly awaking from a reverie, again asks—

“Would it upset this skiff if I were to step on the side of it—I mean bearing upon it with all the weight of my body?”

“That would it, your Reverence ; though ye be but a light weight ; tip it over like a tub.”

“Quite turn it upside down—as your old truckle, eh ?”

“Well ; not so ready as the truckle. Still 'twould go bottom upward. Though a biggish boat, it be one o' the crankiest kind, and would sure capsize wi' the lightiest o' men standin' on its gunnl rail.”

“And surer with a heavier one, as yourself, for instance ?”

“I shouldn't like to try—your Reverence bein' wi' me in the boat.”

“How would you like, somebody else

being with you in it—if *made worth your while?*”

Coracle starts at this question, asked in a tone that makes more intelligible the others preceding it, and which have been hitherto puzzling him. He begins to see the drift of the *sub Jove* confessional to which he is being submitted.

“How’d I like it, your Reverence? Well enough; if, as you say, made worth my while. I don’t mind a bit o’ a wettin’ when there’s anythin’ to be gained by it. Many’s the one I’ve had on a chilly winter’s night, as this same be, all for the sake o’ a salmon, I wor ’bleeged to sell at less’n half-price. If only showed the way to earn a honest penny by it, I wouldn’t wait for the upsettin’ o’ the boat, but jump overboard at onest.”

“That’s game in you, Monsieur Dick. But to earn the honest penny you speak of, the upsetting of the boat might be a necessary condition.”

“Be it so, your Reverence. I’m willing to fulfil that, if ye only bid me. Maybe,”

he continues in tone of confidential suggestion, "there be somebody as you think ought to get a duckin' beside myself?"

"There is somebody, who ought," rejoins the priest, coming nearer to his point. "Nay, must," he continues, "for if he don't the chances are we shall all go down together, and that soon."

Coracle sculls on without questioning. He more than half comprehends the figurative speech, and is confident he will ere long receive complete explanation of it.

He is soon led a little way further by the priest observing—

"No doubt, *mon ancien braconnier*, you've been gratified by the change that's of late taken place in your circumstances. But perhaps it hasn't quite satisfied you, and you expect to have something more; as I have the wish you should. And you would ere this, but for one who obstinately sets his face against it."

"May I know who that one is, Father Rogier?"

"You may, and shall; though I should

think you scarce need telling. Without naming names, it's he who will be in this boat with you going back to Llangorren."

"I thought so. An' if I an't astray, he be the one your Reverence thinks would not be any the worse o' a wettin'?"

"Instead, all the better for it. It may cure him of his evil courses—drinking, card-playing, and the like. If he's not cured of them by some means, and soon, there won't be an acre left him of the Llangorren lands, nor a shilling in his purse. He'll have to go back to beggary, as at Glyngog; while you, Monsieur Coracle, in place of being head-gamekeeper, with other handsome preferments in prospect, will be compelled to return to your shifty life of poaching, night netting, and all the etceteras. Would you desire that?"

"Daanged if I would! An' won't do it if I can help. Shan't if your Reverence 'll only show me the way."

"There's but one I can think of."

"What may that be, Father Rogier?"

“Simply to set your foot on the side of this skiff, and tilt it bottom upwards.”

“It shall be done. When, and where?”

“When you are coming back down. The where you may choose for yourself—such place as may appear safe and convenient. Only take care you don’t drown yourself.”

“No fear o’ that. There an’t water in the Wye as ’ll ever drown Dick Dempsey.”

“No,” jocularly returns the priest; “I don’t suppose there is. If it be your fate to perish by asphyxia—as no doubt it is—strong tough hemp, and not weak water, will be the agent employed—that being more appropriate to the life you have led. Ha! ha! ha!”

Coracle laughs too, but with the grimace of wolf baying the moon. For the moonlight shining full in his face, shows him not over satisfied with the coarse jest. But remembering how he shifted that treacherous plank bridging the brook at Abergann he silently submits to it. He may not much longer. He, too, is gradually

getting his hand upon a lever, which will enable him to have a say in the affairs of Llangorren Court, that they dwelling therein will listen to him, or, like the Philistines of Gaza, have it dragged down about their ears.

But the ex-poacher is not yet prepared to enact the *rôle* of Samson; and however galling the *jeu d'esprit* of the priest, he swallows it without showing chagrin, far less speaking it.

In truth there is no time for further exchange of speech, at least in the skiff. By this they have arrived at the Rugg's Ferry landing-place, where Father Rogier, getting out, whispers a few words in Coracle's ear, and then goes off.

His words were—

“A hundred pounds, Dick, if you do it. Twice that for your doing it adroitly!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALMOST A "VERT."

MAJOR MAHON is standing at one of the front windows of his house waiting for his dinner to be served, when he sees a *fiacre* driven up to the door, and inside it the face of a friend.

He does not stay for the bell to be rung, but with genuine Irish impulsiveness rushes forth, himself opening the door.

"Captain Ryecroft!" he exclaims, grasping the new arrival by the hand, and hauling him out of the hackney. "Glad to see you back in Boulogne." Then adding, as he observes a young man leap down from the box where he has had seat beside the driver, "Part of your belongings, isn't he?"

"Yes, Major; my old Wye waterman,

Jack Wingate, of whom I spoke to you. And if it be convenient to you to quarter both of us for a day or two——”

“Don’t talk about convenience, and bar all mention of time. The longer you stay with me you’ll be conferring the greater favour. Your old room is gaping to receive you; and Murtagh will rig up a berth for your boatman. Murt!” to the ex-Royal Irish, who, hearing the *fracas*, has also come forth, “take charge of Captain Rye-croft’s traps, along with Mr. Wingate here, and see all safely bestowed. Now, old fellow, step inside. They’ll look after the things. You’re just in time to do dinner with me. I was about sitting down to it *solus*, awfully lamenting my loneliness. Well; one never knows what luck’s in the wind. Rather hard lines for you, however. If I mistake not, my pot’s of the poorest this blessed day. But I know you’re neither *gourmand* nor *gourmet*; and that’s some consolation. In!”

In go they, leaving the old soldier to settle the *flacre* fare, look after the luggage,

and extend the hospitalities of the kitchen to Jack Wingate.

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Soon as Captain Ryecroft has performed some slight ablutions—necessary after a sea voyage however short—his host hurries him down to the dining-room.

When seated at the table, the Major asks—

“What on earth has delayed you, Vivian? You promised to be back in a week at most. It’s months now! Despairing of your return, I had some thought of advertising the luggage you left with me, ‘if not claimed within a certain time, to be sold for the payment of expenses.’ Ha! ha!”

Ryecroft echoes the laugh; but so faintly, his friend can see the cloud has not yet lifted; instead, lies heavy and dark as ever.

In hopes of doing something to dissipate it, the Major rolls on in his rich Hibernian brogue—

“You’ve just come in time to save your

chattels from the hammer. And now I have you here I mean to keep you. So, old boy, make up your mind to an unlimited sojourn in Boulogne-sur-mer. You will, won't you?"

"It's very kind of you, Mahon; but that must depend on——"

"On what?"

"How I prosper in my errand."

"Oh! this time you *have* an errand? Some business?"

"I have."

"Well, as you had none before, it gives reason to hope that other matters may be also reversed, and instead of shooting off like a comet, you'll play the part of a fixed star; neither to shoot nor be shot at, as looked likely on the last occasion. But speaking seriously, Ryecroft, as you say you're on business, may I know its nature?"

"Not only may, but it's meant you should. Nay, more, Mahon; I want your help in it."

"That you can count upon, whatever it

be—from pitch-and-toss up to manslaughter. Only say how I can serve you."

"Well, Major, in the first place I would seek your assistance in some inquiries I am about to make."

"Inquiries! Have they regard to that young lady you said was lost—missing from her home! Surely she has been found?"

"She has—found drowned!"

"Found drowned! God bless me!"

"Yes, Mahon. The home from which she was missing knows her no more. Gwendoline Wynn is now in her long home—in Heaven!"

The solemn tone of voice, with the woe-begone expression on the speaker's face, drives all thoughts of hilarity out of the listener's mind. It is a moment too sacred for mirth; and between the two friends, old comrades in arms, for an interval even speech is suspended; only a word of courtesy as the host presses his guest to partake of the viands before them.

The Major does not question further,

leaving the other to take up the broken thread of the conversation.

Which he at length does, holding it in hand, till he has told all that happened since they last sat at that table together.

He gives only the facts, reserving his own deductions from them. But Mahon, drawing them for himself, says searchingly—

“Then you have a suspicion there’s been what’s commonly called foul play?”

“More than a suspicion. I’m sure of it.”

“The devil! But who do you suspect?”

“Who should I, but he now in possession of the property—her cousin, Mr. Lewin Murdock. Though I’ve reason to believe there are others mixed up in it; one of them a Frenchman. Indeed, it’s chiefly to make inquiry about him I’ve come over to Boulogne.”

“A Frenchman. You know his name?”

“I do; at least that he goes by on the other side of the Channel. You remember

that night as we were passing the back entrance of the convent where your sister's at school, our seeing a carriage there—a hackney, or whatever it was?"

"Certainly I do."

"And my saying that the man who had just got out of it, and gone inside, resembled a priest I'd seen but a day or two before?"

"Of course I remember all that; and my joking you at the time as to the idleness of you fancying a likeness among sheep, where all are so nearly of the same hue—that black. Something of the sort I said. But what's your argument?"

"No argument at all, but a conviction, that the man we saw that night was my Herefordshire priest. I've seen him several times since—had a good square look at him—and feel sure 'twas he."

"You haven't yet told me his name?"

"Rogier—Father Rogier. So he is called upon the Wye."

"And, supposing him identified, what follows?"

"A great deal follows, or rather depends on his identification."

"Explain, Ryecroft. I shall listen with patience."

Ryecroft does explain, continuing his narrative into a second chapter, which includes the doings of the Jesuit on Wye-side, so far as known to him; the story of Jack Wingate's love and loss—the last so strangely resembling his own—the steps afterwards taken by the waterman; in short, everything he can think of that will throw light upon the subject.

"A strange tale, truly!" observes the Major, after hearing it to the end. "But does your boatman really believe the priest has resuscitated his dead sweetheart and brought her over here with the intention of shutting her up in a nunnery?"

"He does all that; and certainly not without show of reason. Dead or alive, the priest or some one else has taken the girl out of her coffin, and her grave."

"'Twould be a wonderful story, if true—I mean the resuscitation, or resurrec-

tion ; not the mere disinterment of a body. That's possible, and probable where priests of the Jesuitical school are concerned. And so should the other be, when one considers that they can make statues wink, and pictures shed tears. Oh ! yes ; Ultramontane magicians can do anything !"

"But why," asks Ryecroft, "should they have taken all this trouble about a poor girl—the daughter of a small Herefordshire farmer,—with possibly at the most a hundred pounds, or so, for her dowry ? That's what mystifies me !"

"It needn't," laconically observes the Major. "These Jesuit gentry have often other motives than money for caging such birds in their convents. Was the girl good looking?" he asks after musing a moment.

"Well, of myself I never saw her. By Jack's description she must have been a superb creature—on a par with the angels. True, a lover's judgment is not much to be relied on, but I've heard from others, that Miss Morgan was really a rustic belle—something beyond the common."

“Faith! and that may account for the whole thing. I know they like their nuns to be nice looking; prefer that stripe; I suppose, for purposes of proselytizing, if nothing more. They’d give a good deal to receive the services of my own sister in that way; have been already bidding for her. By Heavens! I’d rather see her laid in her grave!”

The Major’s strong declaration is followed by a spell of silence; after which, cooling down a little, he continues—

“You’ve come, then, to inquire into this convent matter, about—what’s the girl’s name?—ah! Morgan.”

“More than the convent matter; though it’s in the same connection. I’ve come to learn what can be learnt about this priest; get his character, with his antecedents. And, if possible, obtain some information respecting the past lives of Mr. Lewin Murdock and his French wife; for which I may probably go on to Paris, if not further. To sum up everything, I’ve determined to sift this mystery to the bottom—unravel it

to its last thread. I've already commenced unwinding the clue, and made some little progress. But I want one to assist me. Like a lone hunter on a lost trail, I need counsel from a companion—and help too. You'll stand by me, Mahon?"

"To the death, my dear boy! I was going to say the last shilling in my purse. As you don't need that, I say, instead, to the last breath in my body!"

"You shall be thanked with the last in mine."

"I'm sure of that. And now for a drop of the 'crayther,' to warm us to our work. Ho! there, Murt! bring in the 'matay-reals.'"

Which Murtagh does, the dinner-dishes having been already removed.

Soon as punches have been mixed, the Major returns to the subject, saying—

"Now then; to enter upon particulars. What step do you wish me to take, first?"

"First, to find out who Father Rogier is, and what. That is, on this side; I know what he is on the other. If we can but

learn his relations with the convent it might give us a key, capable of opening more than one lock."

"There won't be much difficulty in doing that, I take it. All the less, from my little sister Kate being a great pet of the Lady Superior, who has hopes of making a nun of her! Not if I know it! Soon as her schooling's completed she walks out of that seminary, and goes to a place where the moral atmosphere is a trifle purer. You see, old fellow, I'm not very bigoted about our Holy Faith, and in some danger of becoming a 'vert.' As for my sister, were it not for a bit of a legacy left on condition of her being educated in a convent, she'd never have seen the inside of one, with my consent; and never will again when out of this one. But money's money; and though the legacy isn't a large one, for her sake I couldn't afford to forfeit it. You comprehend?"

"Quite. And you think she will be able to obtain the information, without in any way compromising herself?"

"Pretty sure of it. Kate's no simpleton, though she be but a child in years. She'll manage it for me, with the instructions I mean giving her. After all, it may not be so much trouble. In these nunneries, things which are secrets to the world without, are known to every mother's child of them—nuns and novices alike. Gossip's the chief occupation of their lives. If there's been an occurrence such as you speak of—a new bird caged there—above all an English one—it's sure to have got wind—that is inside the walls. And I can trust Kate to catch the breath, and blow it outside. So, Vivian, old boy, drink your toddy, and take things coolly. I think I can promise you that, before many days, or it may be only hours, you shall know whether such a priest as you speak of, be in the habit of coming to that convent; and if so, what for, when he was there last, and everything about the reverend gentleman worth knowing.

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Kate Mahon proves equal to the occasion ; showing herself quick witted, as her brother boasted her to be.

On the third day after, she is able to report to him ; that some time previously, how long not exactly known, a young English girl came to the convent, brought thither by a priest named Rogier. The girl is a candidate for the Holy Sisterhood—voluntary of course—to take the veil, soon as her probation be completed. Miss Mahon has not seen the new novice ; only heard of her as being a great beauty ; for personal charms make noise even in a nunnery. Nor have any of the other *pensionnaires* been permitted to see or speak with her. All they as yet know is, that she is a blonde, with yellow hair—a grand wealth of it—and goes by the name of “ Sœur Marie.”

“ Sister Mary ! ” exclaims Jack Wingate, as Ryecroft at second-hand communicates the intelligence—at the same time translating the “ Sœur Marie.” “ It’s Mary Mor-

gan—my Mary! An' by the Heavens of Mercy," he adds, his arms angrily thrashing the air. "she shall come out o' that convent, or I'll lay my life down at its door."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST OF LEWIN MURDOCK.

ONCE more a boat upon the Wye, passing between Rugg's Ferry and Llangorren Court, but this time descending. It is the same boat, and as before with two men in it; though they are not both the same who went up. One of them is—Coracle Dick, still at the oars; while Father Rogier's place in the stern is now occupied by another; not sitting upright as was the priest, but lying along the bottom timbers with head coggled over, and somewhat uncomfortably supported by the thwart.

This man is Lewin Murdock, in a state of helpless inebriety—in common parlance, drunk. He has been brought to the boat landing by the landlord of the “Welsh Harp,” where he has been all day carousing; and delivered to Dempsey, who now

at a late hour of the night is conveying him homeward. His hat is down by his feet, instead of upon his head; and the moonbeams, falling unobstructed on his face, show it of a sickly whitish hue; while his eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, have each a demilune of dark purplish colour underneath. But for an occasional twitching of the facial muscles, with a spasmodic movement of the lips, and at intervals, a raucous noise through his nostrils, he might pass for dead, as readily as dead drunk.

Verily, is the priest's prognosis based upon reliable data; for by the symptoms now displayed Lewin Murdock is doing his best to destroy himself—drinking suicidally!

For all, he is not destined thus to die. His end will come even sooner, and it may be easier.

It is not distant now, but ominously near, as may be told by looking into the eyes of the man who sits opposite, and recalling the conversation late exchanged between

him and Father Rogier. For in those dark orbs a fierce light scintillates, such as is seen in the eyes of the assassin contemplating assassination, or the jungle tiger when within springing distance of its prey.

Nothing of all this sees the sot, but lies unconscious, every now and then giving out a snore, regardless of danger, as though everything around were innocent as the pale moonbeams shimmering down upon his cadaverous cheeks.

Possibly he is dreaming, and if so, in all likelihood it is of a grand gas-lighted *salon*, with tables of *tapis vert*, carrying packs of playing cards, dice cubes, and ivory counters. Or the *mise en scène* of his visionary vagaries may be a drinking saloon, where he carouses with boon companions, their gambling limited to a simple tossing of odd and even, "heads or tails."

But if dreaming at all, it is not of what is near him. Else, far gone as he is, he would be aroused—instinctively—to make a last struggle for life. For the thing so near is death!

The fiend who sits regarding him in this helpless condition—as it were holding Lewin Murdock's life, or the little left of it, in his hand—has unquestionably determined upon taking it. Why he does not do so at once is not because he is restrained by any motive of mercy, or reluctance to the spilling of blood. The heart of the *ci-devant* poacher, counterfeiter, and cracksman, has been long ago steeled against such silly and sensitive scruples. The postponement of his hellish purpose is due to a mere question of convenience. He dislikes the idea of having to trudge over miles of meadow in dripping garments!

True, he could drown the drunken man, and keep himself dry—every stitch. But that would not do. For there will be another coroner's inquest, at which he will have to be present. He has escaped the two preceding; but at this he will be surely called upon, and as principal witness. Therefore he must be able to say he was wet, and prove it as well. Into the river, then, will he go, along with his victim; though

there is no need for his taking the plunge till he has got nearer to Llangorren.

So ingeniously contriving, he sits with arms mechanically working the oars; his eyes upon the doomed man, as those of a cat having a crippled mouse within easy reach of her claws, at any moment to be drawn in and destroyed!

Silently, but rapidly, he rows on, needing no steerer. Between Rugg's Ferry and Llangorren Court he is as familiar with the river's channel as a coachman with the carriage-drive to and from his master's mansion; knows its every curve and crook, every purl and pool, having explored them while paddling his little "truckle." And now, sculling the larger craft, it is all the same. And he pulls on, without once looking over his shoulder; his eyes alone given to what is directly in front of him; Lewin Murdock lying motionless at his feet.

As if himself moved by a sudden impulse—impatience, or the thought it might be as well to have the dangerous work over

—he ceases pulling, and acts as though he were about to unship the oars.

But again he seems suddenly to change his intention; on observing a white fleck by the river's edge, which he knows to be the lime-washed walls of the widow Wingate's cottage, at the same time remembering that the main road passes by it.

What if there be some one on the road, or the river's bank, and he seen in the act of capsizing his own boat? True, it is after midnight, and not likely any one abroad—even the latest wayfarer. But there might be; and in such clear moonlight his every movement could be made out.

That place will not do for the deed of darkness he is contemplating; and he trembles to think how near he has been to committing himself!

Thus warned to the taking of precautions hitherto not thought of, he proceeds onward; summoning up before his mind the different turns and reaches of the river, all the while mentally anathematising the

moon. For, besides convenience of place, time begins to press, even trouble him, as he recalls the proverb of the cup and the lip.

He is growing nervously impatient—almost apprehensive of failure, through fear of being seen—when rounding a bend he has before him the very thing he is in search of—the place itself. It is a short straight reach, where the channel is narrow, with high banks on both sides, and trees overhanging, whose shadows meeting across shut off the hated light, shrouding the whole water surface in deep obscurity. It is but a little way above the lone farmhouse of Abergann, and the mouth of the brook which there runs in. But Coracle Dick is not thinking of either; only of the place being appropriate for his diabolical design.

And, becoming satisfied it is so, he delays no longer, but sets about its execution—carrying it out with an adroitness which should fairly entitle him to the double reward promised by the priest. Having

unshipped the oars, he starts to his feet; and mounting upon the thwart, there for a second or two stands poised and balancing. Then, stepping to the side, he sets foot on the gunwale rail with his whole body's weight borne upon it.

In an instant over goes the boat, careening bottom upwards, and spilling Lewin Murdock, as himself, into the mad surging river!

The drunken man goes down like a lump of lead; possibly without pain, or the consciousness of being drowned; only supposing it the continuation of his dream!

Satisfied he has gone down, the assassin cares not how. He has enough to think of in saving himself, enough to do swimming in his clothes, even to the boots.

He reaches the bank, nevertheless, and climbs up it, exhausted; shivering like a water spaniel, for snow has fallen on Plinlimmon, and its thaw has to do with the freshet in the stream.

But the chill of the Wye's water is nought compared with that sent through

his flesh, to the very marrow of his bones, on discovering he has crawled out upon the spot—the selfsame spot—where the waves gave back another body he had consigned to them—that of Mary Morgan!

For a moment he stands horror-struck, with hair on end. The blood curdling in his veins. Then, nerving himself to the effort, he hitches up his dripping trousers, and hurries away from the accursed place—by himself accursed—taking the direction of Llangorren, but giving a wide berth to Abergann.

He has no fear of approaching the former in wet garments; instead knows that in this guise he will be all the more warmly welcomed—as he is!

Mrs. Murdock sits up late for Lewin—though with little expectation of his coming home. Looking out of the window, in the moonlight she sees a man, who comes striding across the carriage sweep, and up into the portico.

Rushing to the door to receive him, she exclaims in counterfeit surprise—

“ You, Monsieur Richard ! Not my husband ! ”

When Coracle Dick has told his sad tale, shaped to suit the circumstances, her half-hysterical ejaculation might be supposed a cry of distress. Instead, it is one of ecstatic delight, she is unable to restrain, at knowing herself now sole owner of the house over her head, and the land for miles around it !

CHAPTER XX.

A CHAPTER DIPLOMATIC.

ANOTHER day has dawned, another sun set upon Boulogne; and Major Mahon is again in his dining-room, with Captain Ryecroft, his sole guest.

The cloth has been removed, the Major's favourite after-dinner beverage brought upon the table, and, with punches "brewed" and cigars set alight, they have commenced conversation upon the incidents of the day—those especially relating to Ryecroft's business in Boulogne.

The Major has had another interview with his sister—a short one, snatched while she was out with her school companions for afternoon promenade. It has added some further particulars to those they had already learnt, both about the English girl confined within the nunnery and the priest

who conveyed her thither. That the latter was Father Rogier is placed beyond a doubt by a minute description of his person given to Miss Mahon, well known to the individual who gave it. To the nuns within that convent the man's name is familiar—even to his baptismal appellation, Gregoire; for although the Major has pronounced all the sacerdotal fraternity alike, in being black, this particular member of it is of a shade deeper than common—a circumstance of itself going a good way towards his identification. Even within that sacred precinct where he is admitted, a taint attaches to him; though what its nature the young lady has not yet been able to ascertain.

The information thus obtained tallies with the estimate of the priest's character, already formed; in correspondence, too, with the theory that he is capable of the crime Captain Ryecroft believes him to have abetted, if not actually committed. Nor is it contradicted by the fact of his being a frequent visitor to the nunnery, and a favourite with the administration thereof;

indeed an intimate friend of the Abbess herself. Something more, in a way accounting for all: that the new novice is not the first *agneau d' Angleterre* he has brought over to Boulogne, and guided into that same fold, more than one of them having ample means, not only to provision themselves, but a surplus for the support of the general sisterhood.

There is no word about any of these English lambs having been other than voluntary additions to the French flock; but a whisper circulates within the convent walls, that Father Rogier's latest contribution is a recusant, and if she ever become a nun it will be a *forced* one; that the thing is *contre cœur*—in short, she protests against it.

Jack Wingate can well believe that; still under full conviction that "Sœur Marie" is Mary Morgan; and, despite all its grotesque strangeness and wild improbability, Captain Ryecroft has pretty nearly come to the same conclusion; while the Major, with less knowledge of antecedent

circumstances, but more of nunneries, never much doubted it.

“About the best way to get the girl out. What’s your idea, Mahon?”

Ryecroft asks the question in no careless or indifferent way; on the contrary, with a feeling earnestness. For, although the daughter of the Wyese farmer is nought to him, the Wye waterman is; and he has determined on seeing the latter through—to the end of the mysterious affair. In difficulties Jack Wingate has stood by him, and he will stand by Jack, *coûte-qui-coute*. Besides, figuratively speaking, they are still in the same boat. For if Wingate’s dead sweetheart, so strangely returned to life, can be also restored to liberty, the chances are she may be the very one wanted to throw light on the other and alas! surer death. Therefore, Captain Ryecroft is not all unselfish in backing up his boatman; nor, as he puts the question, being anxious about the answer.

“We’ll have to use strategy,” returns the Major; not immediately, but after taking a

grand gulp out of his tumbler, and a vigorous draw at his *regalia*.

"But why should we?" impatiently demands the Captain. "If the girl have been forced in there, and's kept against her will—which by all the probabilities she is—surely she can be got out, on demand being made by her friends?"

"That's just what isn't sure—though the demand were made by her own mother, with the father to back it. You forget, old fellow, that you're in France, not England."

"But there's a British Consul in Boulogne."

"Aye, and a British Foreign Minister, who gives that Consul his instructions; with some queer ideas besides, neither creditable to himself nor his country. I'm speaking of that jaunty diplomat—the "judicious bottle-holder," who is accustomed to cajole the British public with his blarney about 'Civis Romanus sum.'"

"True, but does that bear upon our affair?"

"It does—almost directly."

“In what way? I do not comprehend.”

“Because you’re not up to what’s passing over here—I mean at headquarters—the Tuilleries, or St. Cloud, if you prefer it. There the man—if man he can be called—is ruled by the woman; she in her turn the devoted partisan of Pio Nono and the unprincipled Antonelli.”

“I can understand all that; still I don’t quite see its application, or how the English Foreign Minister can be interested in those you allude to?”

“I do. But for him, not one of the four worthies spoken of would be figuring as they are. In all probability France would still be a republic instead of an empire, wicked as the world ever saw; and Rome another republic—it maybe all Italy—with either Mazzini or Garibaldi at its head. For, certain as you sit there, old boy, it was the judicious bottle-holder who hoisted Nap into an imperial throne, over that Presidential chair, so ungratefully spurned—scurvily kicked behind after it had served his purpose. A fact of which the English

people appear to be yet in purblind ignorance! As they are of another, equally notable, and alike misunderstood: that it was this same *civis Romanus sum* who restored old Pio to his apostolic chair; those red-breeched ruffians, the Zouaves, being but so much dust thrown into people's eyes—a bone to keep the British bull-dog quiet. He would have growled then, and will yet, when he comes to understand all these transactions; when the cloak of that scoundrelly diplomacy which screens them has rotted into shreds, letting the light of true history shine upon them.”

“Why, Mahon! I never knew you were such a politician! Much less such a Radical!”

“Nothing much of either, old fellow. Only a man who hates tyranny in every shape and form—whether religious or political. Above all, that which owes its existence to the cheapest—the very shabbiest chicanery the world was ever bamboozled with. I like open dealing in all things.”

“But you are not recommending it, now—in this little convent matter?”

“ Ah! that’s quite a different affair! There are certain ends that justify certain means—when the Devil must be fought with his own weapons. Ours is of that kind, and we must either use strategy, or give the thing up altogether. By open measures there wouldn’t be the slightest chance of our getting this girl out of the convent’s clutches. Even then we may fail; but, if successful, it will only be by great craft, some luck, and possibly a good deal of time spent before we accomplish our purpose.”

“ Poor fellow!” rejoins Ryecroft, speaking of the Wye waterman, “ he won’t like the idea of long waiting. He’s madly, terribly impatient. This afternoon as we were passing the Convent I had a difficulty to restrain him from rushing up to its door, ringing the bell, and demanding an interview with the ‘Sœur Marie’—having his Mary, as he calls her, restored to him on the instant.”

“ It’s well you succeeded in hindering that little bit of rashness. Had he done

so, 'twould have ended not only in the door being slammed in his face, but another door shut behind his back—that of a gaol ; from which he would never have issued till embarking on a voyage to New Caledonia or Cayenne. Aye, both of you might have been so served. For would you believe it Ryecroft, that you, an officer of the boasted H.B.R.A. ; rich, and with powerful friends—even you could be not only here imprisoned, but *deporté*, without any one who has interest in you being the wiser ; or, if so, having no power to prevent it. France, under the regime of Napoleonle Petit, is not so very different from what it was under the rule of Louis le Grand, and *lettres de cachet* are now rife as then. Nay, more of them now written, consigning men to a hundred Bastilles instead of one. Never was a people so enslaved as these Johnny Crapauds are at this present time ; not only their speech fettered, but their very thoughts held in bondage, or so constrained, they may not impart them to one another. Even intimate friends forbear exchanging confidences,

lest one prove false to the other ! Nothing free but insincerity and sin ; both fostered and encouraged from that knowledge intuitive among tyrants ; that wickedness weakens a people, making them easier to rule and ride over. So, my boy, you perceive the necessity of our acting with caution in this business, whatever trouble or time it may take—don't you ? ”

“ I do.”

“ After all,” pursues the Major, “ it seems to me that time isn't of so much consequence. As regards the girl, they're not going to eat her up. And for the other matters concerning yourself, they'll keep, too. As you say, the scent's become cold ; and a few days more or less can't make any difference. Beside, the trails we intend following may in the end all run into one. I shouldn't be at all surprised if this captive damsel has come to the knowledge of something connected with the other affair. Faith, that may be the very reason for their having her conveyed over here, to be cooped up for the rest of her life. In any case,

the fact of her abduction, in such an odd outrageous way, would of itself be damning collateral evidence against whoever has done it, showing him or them good for anything. So, the first work on our hands, as the surest, is to get the waterman's sweetheart out of the convent, and safe back to her home in Herefordshire.

"That's our course, clearly. But have you any thoughts as to how we should proceed?"

"I have; more than thoughts—hopes of success—and sanguine ones."

"Good! I'm glad to hear it. Upon what do you base them?"

"On that very near relative of mine—Sister Kate. As I've told you, she's a pet of the Lady Superior; admitted into the very *arcana* of the establishment. And with such privilege, if she can't find a way to communicate with any one therein closeted, she must have lost the mother wit born to her, and brought thither from the 'brightest gem of the say.' I don't think she has, or that it's been a bit blunted in

Boulogne. Instead, somewhat sharpened by communion with these Holy Sisters; and I've no fear but that 'twill be sharp enough to serve us in the little scheme I've in part sketched out."

"Let me hear it, Mahon?"

"Kate must obtain an interview with the English girl; or, enough if she can slip a note into her hand. That would go some way towards getting her out—by giving her intimation that friends are near."

"I see what you mean," rejoins the Captain, pulling away at his cigar, the other left to finish giving details of the plan he has been mentally projecting.

"We'll have to do a little bit of burglary, combined with abduction. Serve them out in their own coin; as it were hoisting the priest on his own petard!"

"It will be difficult, I fear."

"Of course it will; and dangerous. Likely more the last than the first. But it'll have to be done; else we may drop the thing entirely."

"Never, Mahon! No matter what the

danger, I for one am willing to risk it. And we can reckon on Jack Wingate. He'll be only too ready to rush into it."

"Ah! there might be more danger through his rashness. But it must be held in check. After all, I don't apprehend so much difficulty if things be dexterously managed. Fortunately there's a circumstance in our favour."

"What is it?"

"A window."

"Ah! Where?"

"In the Convent of course. That which gives light—not much of it either—to the cloister where the girl is confined. By a lucky chance my sister has learnt the particular one, and seen the window from the outside. It looks over the grounds where the nuns take recreation, now and then allowed intercourse with the school girls. She says it's high up, but not higher than the top of the garden wall; so a ladder that will enable us to scale the one should be long enough to reach the other. I'm more dubious about the dimensions of the window

itself. Kate describes it as only a small affair, with an upright bar in the middle—iron, she believes. Wood or iron, we may manage to remove that; but if the Herefordshire bacon has made your farmer's daughter too big to screw herself through the aperture, then it'll be all up a tree with us. However, we must find out before making the attempt to extract her. From what sister has told me, I fancy we can see the window from the Ramparts above. If so, we may make a distant measurement of it by guess work. Now," continues the Major, coming to his programme of action, "what's got to be done first is that your Wye boatman write a billet doux to his old sweetheart—in the terms I shall dictate to him. Then my sister must contrive, in some way, to put it in the girl's hands, or see that she gets it."

"And what after?"

"Well, nothing much after; only that we must make preparations for the appointment the waterman will make in his epistle."

“It may as well be written now---may it not?”

“Certainly; I was just thinking of that. The sooner the better. Shall I call him in?”

“Do as you think proper, Mahon. I trust everything to you.”

The Major, rising, rings a bell; which brings Murtagh to the dining room door.

“Murt, tell your guest in the kitchen, we wish a word with him.”

The face of the Irish soldier vanishes from view, soon after replaced by that of the Welsh waterman.

“Step inside, Wingate!” says the Captain; which the other does, and remains standing to hear what the word was wanted.

“You can write, Jack—can’t you?”

It is Ryecroft who puts the inquiry.

“Well, Captain; I ain’t much o’ a penman; but I can scribble a sort o’ rough hand after a fashion.”

“A fair enough hand for Mary Morgan to read it, I dare say.”

“ Oh, sir, I only weesh there wor a chance o’ her gettin’ a letter from me ! ”

“ There is a chance. I think we can promise that. If you’ll take this pen and put down what my friend Major Mahon dictates to you, it will in all probability be in her hands ere long.”

Never was pen more eagerly laid hold of than that offered to Jack Wingate. Then, sitting down to the table as directed, he waits to be told what he is to write.

The Major, bent over him, seems cogitating what it should be. Not so, however. Instead, he is occupied with an astronomical problem which is puzzling him. For its solution he appeals to Ryecroft, asking :—

“ How about the moon ? ”

“ The moon ? ”

“ Yes. Which quarter is she in ? For the life of me, I can’t tell.

“ Nor I,” rejoins the Captain. “ I never think of such a thing.”

“ She’s in her last,” puts in the boatman, accustomed to take note of lunar changes.

"It be an old moon now shining all the night, when the sky an't clouded."

"You're right, Jack!" says Ryecroft. "Now I remember; it is the old moon."

"In which case," adds the Major, "we must wait for the new one. We want darkness after midnight—must have it—else we cannot act. Let me see; when will that be?"

"The day week," promptly responds the waterman. "Then she'll be goin' down, most as soon as the sun's self."

"That'll do," says the Major. "Now to the pen!"

Squaring himself to the table, and the sheet of paper spread before him, Wingate writes to dictation. No words of love, but what inspires him with a hope he may once more speak such in the ears of his beloved Mary!

CHAPTER XXI.

A QUICK CONVERSION.

“WHEN is this horror to have an end? Only with my life? Am I, indeed, to pass the remainder of my days within this dismal cell? Days so happy, till that the happiest of all—its ill-starred night! And my love so strong, so confident—its reward seeming so nigh—all to be for nought—sweet dreams and bright hopes suddenly, cruelly extinguished! Nothing but darkness now; within my heart, in this gloomy place, everywhere around me! Oh, it is agony! When will it be over?”

It is the English girl who thus bemoans her fate—still confined in the convent, and the same cloister. Herself changed, however. Though but a few weeks have passed, the roses of her cheeks have become lilies, her lips wan, her features of sharper

outline, the eyes retired in their sockets, with a look of woe unspeakable. Her form, too, has fallen away from the full ripe rounding that characterised it, though the wreck is concealed by a loose drapery of ample folds. For Sœur Marie now wears the garb of the Holy Sisterhood—hating it, as her words show.

She is seated on the pallet's edge while giving utterance to her sombre soliloquy; and without change of attitude continues it:—

“Imprisoned I am—that certain! And for no crime. It may be without hostility on the part of those who have done it. Perhaps, better it were so? Then there might be hope of my captivity coming to an end. As it is, there is none—none! I comprehend all now—the reason for bringing me here—keeping me—everything. And that reason remains—must, as long as I am alive! Merciful heaven!”

The exclamatory phrase is almost a shriek; despair sweeping through her soul, as she thinks of why she is there shut up.

For hinging upon that is the hopelessness, almost a dead, drear certainty, she will never have deliverance !

Stunned by the terrible reflection, she pauses—even thought for the time stayed. But the throe passing, she again pursues her soliloquy, now in more conjectural strain :—

“ Strange that no friend has come after me ? No one caring for my fate—even to inquire ! And *he*—no, that is not strange—only sadder, harder to think of. How could I expect, or hope, he would ?

“ But surely it is not so ? I may be wronging them all—friends—relatives—even him ? They may not know where I am ? Cannot ! How could they ? I know not myself ! Only that it is France, and in a nunnery. But what part of France, and how I came to it, likely they are ignorant as I.

“ And they may never know ! Never find out ! If not, oh ! what is to become of me ? Father in Heaven ! Merciful Saviour ! help me in my helplessness ! ”

After this phrensied outburst a calmer interval succeeds; in which human instincts as thoughts direct her. She thinks:—

“If I could but find means to communicate with my friends—make known to them where I am, and how, then—Ah! ’tis hopeless. No one allowed near me but the attendant and that Sister Ursule. For compassion from either, I might just as well make appeal to the stones of the floor! The Sister seems to take delight in torturing me—every day doing or saying some disagreeable thing. I suppose, to humble, break, bring me to her purpose—that the taking of the veil. A nun! Never! It is not in my nature, and I would rather die than dissemble it!”

“Dissemble!” she repeats in a different accent. “That word helps me to a thought. Why should I not dissemble? I *will*.”

Thus emphatically pronouncing, she springs to her feet, the expression of her features changing suddenly as her attitude. Then paces the floor to and fro, with hands clasped across her forehead, the white

attenuated fingers writhingly entwined in her hair.

“They want me to take the veil—the *black* one! So shall I; the blackest in all the convent’s wardrobe if they wish it—aye, crape if they insist on it? Yes, I am resigned now—to that—anything. They can prepare the robes, vestments, all the adornments of their detested mummery; I am prepared, willing, to put them on. It’s the only way—my only hope of regaining liberty. I see—am sure of it!”

She pauses, as if still but half resolved, then goes on—

“I am compelled to this deception! Is it a sin? If so, God forgive me! But no—it cannot be! ’Tis justified by my wrongs—my sufferings!”

Another and longer pause, during which she seems profoundly to reflect. After it—saying:

“I shall do so—pretend compliance. And begin this day—this very hour, if the opportunity arise. What should be my first pretence? I must think of it; prac-

tice, rehearse it. Let me see. Ah! I have it. The world has forsaken, forgotten me. Why then should I cling to it! Instead, why not in angry spite fling it off—as it has me. That's the way!"

A creaking at the cloister door tells of its key turning in the lock. Slight as is the sound, it acts on her as an electric shock, suddenly and altogether changing the cast of her countenance. The instant before half angry, half sad, it is now a picture of pious resignation! Her attitude different also. From striding tragically over the floor she has taken a seat, with a book in her hand, which she seems industriously perusing. It is that "Aid to Faith" recommended, but hitherto unread.

She is to all appearance so absorbed in its pages as not to notice the opening of the door, nor the footsteps of one entering. How natural her start, as she hears a voice, and looking up beholds Sœur Ursule!

"Ah!" ejaculates the latter, with an exultant air, as of a spider that sees a fly upon the edge of its web, "Glad, Marie, to

find you so employed ! It promises well, both for the peace of your mind and the good of your soul. You've been foolishly lamenting the world left behind : wickedly too. What is to compare with that to come ? As dross-dirt, to gold or diamonds ! The book you hold in your hand will tell you so. Doesn't it ? ”

“ It does, indeed. ”

“ Then profit by its instructions ; and be sorry you have not sooner taken counsel from it. ”

“ I am sorry, sister Ursule. ”

“ It would have comforted you—will now. ”

“ It has already. Ah ! so much ! I would not have believed any book could give me the view of life it has done. I begin to understand what you've been telling me—to see the vanities of this earthly existence, how poor and empty they are in comparison with the bright joys of that other life. Oh ! why did I not know it before ? ”

At this moment a singular tableau is

exhibited within that Convent cell—two female figures, one seated, the other standing—novice and nun; the former fair and young, the latter ugly as old. And still in greater contrast, the expression upon their faces. That of the girl's downcast, demure, lids over the eyes less as if in innocence than repentant of some sin, while the glances of the woman show pleased surprise, struggling against incredulity!

Her suspicion still in the ascendant, Sœur Ursule stands regarding the disciple, so suddenly converted, with a look which seems to penetrate her very soul. It is borne without sign of quailing, and she at length comes to believe the penitence sincere, and that her proselytising powers have not been exerted in vain. Nor is it strange she should so deceive herself. It is far from being the first novice *contre cœur* she has broken upon the wheel of despair and made content to taking a vow of life-long seclusion from the world.

Convinced she has subdued the proud spirit of the English girl, and gloating

over a conquest she knows will bring substantial reward to herself, she exclaims prayerfully, in mock pious tone :

“Blessed be Holy Mary for this new mercy ! On your knees *ma fille*, and pray to her to complete the work she has begun ! ”

And upon her knees drops the novice, while the nun as if deeming herself *de trop* in the presence of prayer, slips out of the cloister, silently shutting the door.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SUDDEN RELAPSE.

FOR some time after the exit of Sœur Ursule, the English girl retains her seat, with the same demure look she had worn in the presence of the nun; while before her face the book is again open, as though she had returned to reading it. One seeing this might suppose her intensely interested in its contents. But she is not even thinking of them! Instead, of a sharp skinny ear, and a steel gray eye—one or other of which she suspects to be covering the key-hole.

Her own ear is on the alert to catch sounds outside—the shuffling of feet, the rattle of rosary beads, or the swishing of a dress against the door.

She hears none; and at length satisfied that Sister Ursule's suspicions are spent, or her patience exhausted, she draws a free

breath—the first since the *séance* commenced.

Then rising to her feet, she steps to a corner of the cell, not commanded by the keyhole; and there dashes the book down, as though it had been burning her fingers!

“My first scene of deception” she mutters to herself—“first act of hypocrisy. Have I not played it to perfection?”

She draws a chair into the angle, and sits down upon it. For she is still not quite sure that the spying eye has been withdrawn from the aperture, or whether it may not have returned to it.

“Now that I’ve made a beginning,” she murmurs on, “I must think what’s to be done in continuance; and how the false pretence is to be kept up. What will *they* do?—and think? They’ll be suspicious for a while, no doubt; look sharply after me, as ever! But that cannot last always; and surely they won’t doom me to dwell for ever in this dingy hole. When I’ve proved my conversion real, by penance, obedience, and the like, I may secure their confidence,

and by way of reward, get transferred to a more comfortable chamber. Ah! little care I for the comfort, if convenient,—with a window out of which one could look. Then I might have a hope of seeing—speaking to some one—with heart less hard than Sister Ursule’s, and that other creature—a very hag!”

“I wonder where the place is? Whether in the country, or in a town among houses? It may be the last—in the very heart of a great city, for all this death-like stillness! They build these religious prisons with walls so thick! And the voices, I from time to time hear, are all women’s. Not one of a man amongst them! They must be the Convent people themselves! Nuns and novices! Myself one of the latter! Ha! ha! I shouldn’t have known it if Sister Ursule hadn’t informed me. Novice, indeed—soon to be a nun! No! but a free woman—or dead! Death would be better than life like this!”

The derisive smile that for a moment played upon her features passes off, replaced

by the same forlorn woe-begone look, as despair comes back to her heart. For she again recalls what she has read in books—very different from that so contemptuously tossed aside—of girls, young and beautiful as herself—high-born ladies—surreptitiously taken from their homes—shut up as she—never more permitted to look on the sun's light, or bask in its beams, save within the gloomy cloisters of a convent, or its dismally shadowed grounds.

The prospect of such future for herself appals her, eliciting an anguished sigh—almost a groan.

“Ha!” she exclaims the instant after, and again with altered air, as though something had arisen to relieve her. “There are voices now! Still of women! Laughter! How strange it sounds! So sweet! I’ve not heard such since I’ve been here. It’s the voice of a girl? It must be—so clear, so joyous. Yes! Surely it cannot come from any of the sisters? They are never joyful—never laugh.”

She remains listening, soon to hear the

laughter again, a second voice joining in it, both with the cheery ring of school girls at play. The sound comes in with the light—it could not well enter otherwise—and aware of this, she stands facing that way, with eyes turned upward. For the window is far above her head.

“Would that I could see out! If I only had something on which to stand!”

She sweeps the cell with her eyes, to see only the pallet, the frail chairs, a little table with slender legs, and a washstand—all too low. Standing upon the highest, her eyes would still be under the level of the sill.

She is about giving it up, when an artifice suggests itself. With wits sharpened, rather than dulled by her long confinement—she bethinks her of a plan, by which she may at least look out of the window. She can do that by upending the bedstead!

Rash she would raise it on the instant. But she is not so; instead considerate, more than ever cautious. And so proceeding, she first places a chair against the door in such

position that its back blocks the keyhole. Then, dragging bed clothes, mattress, and all to the floor, she takes hold of the wooden framework; and, exerting her whole strength, hoists it on end, tilted like a ladder against the wall. And as such it will answer her purpose, the strong webbing, crossed and stayed, to serve for steps.

A moment more, and she has mounted up, and stands, her chin resting on the window's ledge.

The window itself is a casement on hinges; one of those antique affairs, iron framed, with the panes set in lead. Small, though big enough for a human body to pass through, but for an upright bar centrally bisecting it.

She balancing upon the bedstead, and looking out, thinks not of the bar now, nor takes note of the dimensions of the aperture. Her thoughts, as her glances, are all given to what she sees outside. At the first *coup d'œil*, the roofs and chimnies of houses, with all their appurtenances of patent smoke-curers, weathercocks, and lightning

conductors ; among them domes and spires, showing it a town with several churches.

Dropping her eyes lower they rest upon a garden, or rather a strip of ornamental grounds, tree shaded, with walks, arbours, and seats, girt by a gray massive wall, high almost as the houses.

At a glance she takes in these inanimate objects ; but does not dwell on any of them. For, soon as looking below, her attention becomes occupied with living forms, standing in groups, or in twos or threes strolling about the grounds. They are all women, and of every age ; most of them wearing the garb of the nunnery, loose flowing robes of sombre hue. A few, however, are dressed in the ordinary fashion of young ladies at a boarding school ; and such they are—the *pensionnaires* of the establishment.

Her eyes wandering from group to group, after a time become fixed upon two of the school girls ; who linked arm in arm are walking backward and forward, directly in front. Why she particularly notices them, is that one of the two is acting in a sin-

gular manner; every time she passes under the window looking up to it, as though with a knowledge of something inside in which she feels an interest! Her glances interrogative, are at the same time evidently snatched by stealth—as in fear of being observed by the others. Even her promenading companion seems unaware of them.

She inside the cloister, soon as her first surprise is over, regards this young lady with a fixed stare, forgetting all the others.

“What can it mean?” she asks herself. “So unlike the rest! Surely not French! Can she be English? She is very—very beautiful!”

The last, at least, is true, for the girl is, indeed, a beautiful creature, with features quite different from those around—all of them being of the French facial type, while hers are pronouncedly Irish.

By this the two are once more opposite the window, and the girl again looking up, sees behind the glass—dim with dust and

spiders' webs—a pale face, with a pair of bright eyes gazing stedfastly at her.

She starts ; but quickly recovering, keeps on as before. Then as she faces round at the end of the walk, still within view of the window, she raises her hand, with a finger laid upon her lips, seeming to say, plain as words could speak it—

“Keep quiet ! I know all about you, and why you are there.”

The gesture is not lost upon the captive. But before she can reflect upon its significance the great convent bell breaks forth in noisy clangour, causing a flutter among the figures outside, with a scattering helter skelter. For it is the first summons to vespers, soon followed by the tinier tinkle of the *angelus*.

In a few seconds the grounds are deserted by all save one—the schoolgirl with the Irish features and eyes. She, having let go her companion's arm, and lingering behind the rest, makes a quick slant towards the window she has been watching ; as she approaches it significantly exposing

something white, she holds half hidden between her fingers !

It needs no further gesture to make known her intent. The English girl has already guessed it, as told by the iron casement grating back on its rusty hinges, and left standing ajar. On the instant of its opening the white object parts from the hand that has been holding it, and like a flash of light passes through into the darksome cell, falling with a thud upon the floor.

Not a word goes with it ; for she who has shown such dexterity, soon as delivering the missile, glides away ; so speedily she is still in time to join the *queue* moving on towards the convent chapel.

Cautiously reclosing the window, Sœur Marie descends the steps of her improvised ladder, and takes up the thing that had been tossed in ; which she finds to be a letter shotted inside !

Despite her burning impatience she does not open it, till after restoring the bedstead to the horizontal, and replacing all as before.

For now, as ever, she has need to be circumspect, and with better reasons.

At length, feeling secure, all the more from knowing the nuns are at their vesper devotions, she tears off the envelope, and reads :—

“ MARY,—Monday night next after midnight—if you look out of your window you will see friends ; among them

“ JACK WINGATE.”

“ Jack Wingate ! ” she exclaims, with a look of strange intelligence lighting up her face. “ A voice from dear old Wyeside ! Hope of delivery at last ! ”

And overcome by her emotion she sinks down upon the pallet ; no longer looking sad, but with an expression contented, and beatified as that of the most *devoté* nun in the convent.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A JUSTIFIABLE ABDUCTION.

It is a moonless November night, and a fog drifting down from the *Pas de Calais* envelops Boulogne in its damp, clammy embrace. The great cathedral clock is tolling twelve midnight, and the streets are deserted, the last wooden-heeled *soulier* having ceased clattering over their cobble-stone pavements. If a foot passenger be abroad he is some belated individual groping his way home from the *Café de billars* he frequents, or the *Cercle* to which he belongs. Even the *sergens de ville* are scarcer than usual; those seen being huddled up under the shelter of friendly porches, while the invisible ones are making themselves yet more snug inside *cabarets*, whose openness beyond licensed hours they wink at in return for the accommodation afforded.

It is, in truth, a most disagreeable night : cold as dark, for the fog has frost in it. For all, there are three men in the streets of Boulogne who regard neither its chillness nor obscurity. Instead, this last is just what they desire, and for days past have been waiting for.

They who thus delight in darkness are Major Mahon, Captain Ryecroft, and the waterman, Wingate. Not because they have thoughts of doing evil, for their purpose is of the very opposite character—to release a captive from captivity. The night has arrived when, in accordance with the promise made on that sheet of paper so dexterously pitched into her cloister, the Sœur Marie is to see friends in front of her window. They are the friends; about to attempt taking her out of it.

They are not going blindly about the thing. Unlikely old campaigners as Mahon and Ryecroft would. During the interval since that warning summons was sent in, they have made thorough reconnaissance of the ground, taken stock of the convent's

precincts and surroundings; in short, considered every circumstance of difficulty and danger. They are therefore prepared with all the means and appliances for effecting their design.

Just as the last stroke of the clock ceases its booming reverberation, they issue forth from Mahon's house; and, turning up the Rue Tintelleries, strike along a narrower street, which leads on toward the ancient *cité*.

The two officers walk arm in arm, Rye-croft, stranger to the place, needing guidance; while the boatman goes behind, with that carried aslant his shoulder, which, were it on the banks of the Wye, might be taken for a pair of oars. It is nevertheless a thing altogether different—a light ladder; though were it hundreds weight he would neither stagger nor groan under it. The errand he is upon knits his sinews, giving him the strength of a giant.

They proceed with extreme caution, all three silent as spectres. When any sound comes to their ears, as the shutting to of a

door, or distant footfall upon the ill-paved *trottoirs*, they make instant stop, and stand listening—speech passing among themselves only in whispers. But as these interruptions are few, they make fair progress; and, in less than twenty minutes after leaving the Major's house, they have reached the spot where the real action is to commence. This is in the narrow lane which runs along the *enceinte* of the convent at back; a thoroughfare little used even in daytime, but after night solitary as a desert, and on this especial night dark as dungeon itself.

They know the *allée* well; have traversed it scores of times within the last few days, as nights, and could go through it blindfold. And they also know the enclosure wall, with its exact height, just that of the cloister window beyond, and a little less than their ladder, which has been selected with an eye to dimensions.

While its bearer is easing it off his shoulders, and planting it firmly in place, a short whispered dialogue occurs between the other two, the Major saying—

“We won’t all three be needed for the work inside. One of us may remain here—nay, must! Those *sergens de ville* might be prowling about, or some of the convent people themselves: in which case we’ll need warning before we dare venture back over the wall. If caught on the top of it, the petticoats obstructing—aye, or without them—’twould go ill with us.”

“Quite true,” assents the Captain. “Which of us do you propose staying here? Jack?”

“Yes, certainly. And for more reasons than one. Excited as he is now, once getting his old flame into his arms he’d be all on fire—perhaps with noise enough to awake the whole sleeping sisterhood, and bring them clamouring around us, like crows about an owl, that had intruded into the rookery. Besides, there’s a staff of male servants—for they have such—half a score of stout fellows, who’d show fight. A big bell, too, by ringing which they can rouse the town. Therefore, master Jack *must* remain here. You tell him he must.”

Jack is told, with reasons given, though not exactly the real ones. Endorsing them, the Major says—

“Don’t be so impatient, my good fellow ! It will make but a few seconds’ difference ; and then you’ll have your girl by your side, sure. Whereas, acting inconsiderately, you may never set eyes on her. The fight in the front will be easy. Our greatest danger’s from behind ; and you can do better in every way, as for yourself, by keeping the rear guard.”

He thus counselled is convinced : and, though much disliking it, yields prompt obedience. How could he otherwise ? He is in the hands of men his superiors in rank as experience. And is it not for him they are there ; risking liberty — it may be life ?

Having promised to keep his impulsiveness in check, he is instructed what to do. Simply to lie concealed under the shadow of the wall, and should any one be outside when he hears a low whistle, he is *not* to reply to it.

The signal so arranged, Mahon and Rye-croft mount over the wall, taking the ladder along with them, and leaving the waterman to reflect, in nervous anxiety, how near his Mary is, and yet how far off she still may be !

Once inside the garden, the other two strike off along a walk leading in the direction of the spot, which is their objective point. They go as if every grain of sand pressed by their feet had a friend's life in it. The very cats of the Convent could not traverse its grounds more silently.

Their caution is rewarded ; for they arrive at the cloister sought, without interruption, to see its casement open, with a pale face in it—a picture of Madonna on a back ground of black, through the white film looking as if it were veiled.

But though dense the fog, it does not hinder them from perceiving, that the expression of that face is one of expectancy ; nor her from recognizing them as the friends who were to be under the window. With that voice from the Wyeseide still echoing

in her ears, she sees her deliverers at hand ! They have indeed come.

A woman of weak nerves would under the circumstances be excited—possibly cry out. But Sœur Marie is not such ; and without uttering a word, even the slightest ejaculation, she stands still, and patiently, waits while a wrench is applied to the rotten bar of iron, soon snapping it from its support, as though it were but a stick of maccaroni.

It is Ryecroft who performs this burglarious feat, and into his arms she delivers herself, to be conducted down the ladder ; which is done without as yet a word having been exchanged between them.

Only after reaching the ground, and there is some feeling of safety, he whispers to her :—

“Keep up your courage, Mary ! Your Jack is waiting for you outside the wall. Here, take my hand——”

“Mary ! My Jack ! And you—you——” Her voice becomes inaudible, and she totters back against the wall !

"She's swooning—has fainted!" mutters the Major; which Ryecroft already knows, having stretched out his arms, and caught her as she is sinking to the earth.

"It's the sudden change into the open air," he says. "We must carry her, Major. You go ahead with the ladder, I can manage the girl myself."

While speaking he lifts the unconscious form, and bears it away. No light weight either, but to strength as his, only a feather.

The Major going in advance with the ladder guides him through the mist; and in a few seconds they reach the outer wall, Mahon giving a low whistle as he approaches. It is almost instantly answered by another from the outside, telling them the coast is clear.

And in three minutes after they are also on the outside, the girl still resting in Ryecroft's arms. The waterman wishes to relieve him, agonized by the thought that his sweetheart, who has passed unscathed,

as it were, through the very gates of death, may after all be dead !

He urges it ; but Mahon, knowing the danger of delay, forbids any sentimental interference, commanding Jack to re-shoulder the ladder and follow as before.

Then striking off in Indian file, the Major first, the Captain with his burden in the centre, the boatman bringing up behind, they retrace their steps towards the Rue Tintelleries.

If Ryecroft but knew who he is carrying, he would bear her, if not more tenderly, with far different emotions, and keener solicitude about her recovery from that swoon.

It is only after she is out of his arms ; and lying upon a couch in Major Mahon's house—the hood drawn back and the light shining on her face—that he experiences a thrill, strange and wild as ever felt by mortal man ! No wonder—seeing it is Gwendoline Wynn !

“ Gwen ! ” he exclaims, in a very ecstasy

of joy, as her pulsing breast and opened eyes tell of returned consciousness.

“Vivian!” is the murmured rejoinder, their lips meeting in delirious contact.

Poor Jack Wingate!

CHAPTER XXIV.

STARTING ON A CONTINENTAL TOUR.

LEWIN MURDOCK is dead, and buried—has been for days. Not in the family vault of the Wynns, though he had the right of having his body there laid. But his widow, who had control of the interment, willed it otherwise. She has repugnance to opening that receptacle of the dead, holding a secret she may well dread disclosure of.

There was no very searching enquiry into the cause of the man's death; none such seeming needed. A coroner's inquest, true; but of the most perfunctory kind. Several habitués of the Welsh Harp, with its staff of waiters, testified to having seen him at that hostelry till a late hour of the night on which he was drowned, and far gone in drink. The landlord advanced the narrative a stage, by telling how he con-

vayed him to the boat, and delivered him to his boatman, Richard Dempsey—all true enough; while Coracle capped the story by a statement of circumstances, in part facts, but the major part fictitious:—how the inebriate gentleman, after lying awhile quiet at the bottom of the skiff, suddenly sprung upon his feet, and staggering excitedly about, capsized the craft, spilling both into the water!

Some corroboration of this, in the boat having been found floating keel upwards, and the boatman arriving home at Llangorren soaking wet. To his having been in this condition several of the Court domestics, at the time called out of their beds, with purpose *prepanse*, were able to bear witness. But Dempsey's testimony is further strengthened, even to confirmation, by himself having since taken to bed, where he now lies dangerously ill of a fever, the result of a cold caught from that chilling *douche*.

In this latest inquest the finding of the jury is set forth in two simple words,

“Drowned accidentally.” No suspicion attaches to any one; and his widow, now wearing the weeds of sombre hue, sorrows profoundly.

But her grief is great only in the eyes of the outside world, and the presence of the Llangorren domestics. Alone within her chamber she shows little signs of sorrow; and if possible less when Gregoire Rogier is her companion; which he almost constantly is. If more than half his time at the Court while Lewin Murdock was alive, he is now there nearly the whole of it. No longer as a guest, but as much its master as she is its mistress! For that matter indeed more; if inference may be drawn from a dialogue occurring between them some time after her husband's death.

They are in the library, where there is a strong chest, devoted to the safe keeping of legal documents, wills, leases, and the like—all the paraphernalia of papers relating to the administration of the estate.

Rogier is at a table upon which many of these lie, with writing materials besides.

A sheet of foolscap is before him, on which he has just scribbled the rough copy of an advertisement intended to be sent to several newspapers.

"I think this will do," he says to the widow, who, in an easy chair drawn up in front of the fire, is sipping Chartreuse, and smoking paper cigarettes. "Shall I read it to you?"

"No. I don't want to be bothered with the thing in detail. Enough, if you let me hear its general purport."

He gives her this in briefest epitome:—

"The Llangorren estates to be sold by public auction, with all the appurtenances, mansion, park, ornamental grounds, home and out farms, manorial rights, presentation to church living, &c., &c."

"*Tres bien!* Have you put down the date? It should be soon."

"You're right, *chérie*. Should, and must be. So soon, I fear we won't realize three-fourths of the value. But there's no help

for it, with the ugly thing threatening—hanging over our necks like a very sword of Damocles.”

“You mean the tongue of *le braconnier*?”

She has reason to dread it.

“No I don’t; not in the slightest. There’s a sickle too near his own—in the hands of the reaper, Death.”

“He’s dying, then?”

She speaks with an earnestness in which there is no feeling of compassion, but the very reverse.

“He is,” the other answers, in like unpitying tone; “I’ve just come from his bedside.”

“From the cold he caught that night, I suppose?”

“Yes; that’s partly the cause. But,” he adds, with a diabolical grin, “more the medicine he has taken for it.”

“What mean you, Gregoire?”

“Only that Monsieur Dick has been delirious, and I saw danger in it. He was talking too wildly.”

“You’ve done something to keep him quiet?”

“I have.”

“What?”

“Given him a sleeping draught.”

“But he’ll wake up again; and then——”

“Then I’ll administer another dose of the anodyne.”

“What sort of anodyne?”

“A *hypodermic*.”

“Hypodermic! I’ve never heard of the thing; not even the name!”

“A wonderful cure it is—for noisy tongues!”

“You excite one’s curiosity. Tell me something of its nature?”

“Oh, it’s very simple; exceedingly so. Only a drop of liquid introduced into the blood; not in the common roundabout way, by pouring down the throat, but direct injection into the veins. The process in itself is easy enough, as every medical practitioner knows. The skill consists in the *kind* of liquid to be injected. That’s one of the occult sciences I learnt

in Italy, land of Lucrezia and Tophana ; where such branches of knowledge still flourish. Elsewhere it's not much known, and perhaps it's well it isn't; or there might be more widowers, with a still larger proportion of widows."

"Poison!" she exclaims involuntarily, adding, in a timid whisper, "Was it, Gregoire?"

"Poison!" he echoes, protestingly. "That's too plain a word, and the idea it conveys too vulgar, for such a delicate scientific operation as that I've performed. Possibly, in Monsieur Coracle's case the effect will be somewhat similiar; but not the after symptoms. If I haven't made miscalculation as to quantity, ere three days are over it will send him to his eternal sleep; and I'll defy all the medical experts in England to detect traces of poison in him. So don't enquire further, *chérie*. Be satisfied to know the hypodermic will do you a service. And," he adds, with sardonic smile, "grateful if it be never given to yourself."

She starts, recoiling in horror. Not at the repulsive confessions she has listened to, but more through personal fear. Though herself steeped in crime, he beside her seems its very incarnation! She has long known him morally capable of anything, and now fancies he may have the power of the famed basilisk to strike her dead with a glance of his eyes!

“Bah!” he exclaims, observing her trepidation, but pretending to construe it otherwise. “Why all this emotion about such a *misérable*? He’ll have no widow to lament him—inconsolable like yourself. Ha! ha! Besides, for our safety—both of us—his death is as much needed as was the other. After killing the bird that threatened to devour our crops, it would be blind buffoonery to keep the scarecrow standing. I only wish, there were nothing but he between us, and complete security.”

“But is there still?” she asks, her alarm taking a new turn, as she observes a slight shade of apprehension pass over his face.

“Certainly there is.”

“What?”

“That little convent matter.”

“*Mon Dieu!* I supposed it arranged beyond the possibility of danger.”

“Probability is the word you mean. In this sweet world there’s nothing sure except money—that, too, in hard cash coin. Even at the best we’ll have to sacrifice a large slice of the estate to satisfy the greed of those who have assisted us—*Messieurs les Jesuites*. If I could only, as by some magician’s wand, convert these clods of Herefordshire into a portable shape, I’d cheat them yet; as I’ve done already, in making them believe me one of their most ardent *doctrinaires*. Then, *chère amie*, we could at once move from Llangorren Court to a palace by some Lake of Como, glassing softest skies, with whispering myrtles, and all the other fal-lals, by which Monsieur Bulwer’s sham prince humbugged the Lyonesse shopkeeper’s daughter. Ha! ha! ha!”

“But why can’t it be done?”

“Ah! There the word *impossible*, if you

like. What! Convert a landed estate of several thousand acres into cash, *presto-instanter*, as though one were but selling a flock of sheep! The thing can't be accomplished anywhere; least of all in this slow-moving Angleterre, where men look at their money twice—twenty times—before parting with it. Even a mortgage couldn't be managed for weeks—may be months—without losing quite the moiety of value. But a *bonâ fide* sale, for which we must wait, and with that cloud hanging over us! Oh! it's damnable. The thing's been a blunder from beginning to end; all through the squeamishness of Monsieur, *votre mari*. Had he agreed to what I first proposed, and done with Mademoiselle, what should have been done, he might himself still—The simpleton, sot—soft heart, and softer head! Well; it's of no use reviling him now. He paid the forfeit for being a fool. And 'twill do no good our giving way to apprehensions, that after all may turn out shadows, however dark. In the end everything may go right, and we can make our

midnight flitting in a quiet, comfortable way. But what a flutter there'll be among my flock at the Rugg's Ferry Chapel, when they wake up some fine morning, and rub their eyes—only to see that their good shepherd has forsaken them! A comical scene, of which I'd like being a spectator. Ha! ha! ha!"

She joins him in the laugh, for the sally is irresistible. And while they are still ha-ha-ing, a touch at the door tells of a servant seeking admittance.

It is the butler who presents himself, salver in hand, on which rests a chrome-coloured envelope—at a glance seen to be a telegraphic despatch.

It bears the address "Rev. Gregoire Rogier, Rugg's Ferry, Herefordshire," and when opened the telegram is seen to have been sent from Folkestone. Its wording is:—

"The bird has escaped from its cage. Prenez garde!"

Well for the pseudo-priest, and his *chère amie*, that before they read it, the butler

had left the room. For though figurative the form of expression, and cabalistic the words, both man and woman seem instantly to comprehend them. And with such comprehension, as almost to drive them distracted ! He is silent, as if struck dumb, his face showing blanched and bloodless ; while she utters a shriek, half terrified, half in frenzied anger !

It is the last loud cry, or word, to which she gives utterance at Llangorren. And no longer there speaks the priest loudly, or authoritatively. The after hours of that night are spent by both of them, not as the owners of the house, but burglars in the act of breaking it !

Up till the hour of dawn, the two might be seen silently flitting from room to room—attended only by Clarisse, who carries the candle—ransacking drawers and secretares, selecting articles of *bijouterie* and *vertù*, of little weight but large value, and packing them in trunks and travelling bags. All of which, under the grey light of morning are taken to the nearest railway

station in one of the Court carriages—a large drag-barouche—inside which ride Rogier and Madame Murdock *veuve*; her *femme de chambre* having a seat beside the coachman, who has been told they are starting on a continental tour.

* * * * *

And so were they; but it was a tour from which they never returned. Instead, it was extended to a greater distance than they themselves designed, and in a direction neither dreamt of. Since their career, after a year's interval, ended in *deportation* to Cayenne, for some crime committed by them in the South of France. So said the *Semaphore* of Marseilles.

CHAPTER XXV.

CORACLE DICK ON HIS DEATH-BED.

As next morning's sun rises over Llangorren Court, it shows a mansion without either master or mistress !

Not long to remain so. If the old servants of the establishment had short notice of dismissal, still more brief is that given to its latest retinue. About meridian of that day, after the departure of their mistress, while yet in wonder where she has gone, they receive another shock of surprise, and a more unpleasant one, at seeing a hackney carriage drive up to the hall door, out of which step two men, evidently no friends to her from whom they have their wages. For one of the men is Captain Ryecroft, the other a police superintendent; who, after the shortest possible parley, directs the butler to parade the

complete staff of his fellow domestics, male and female. This with an air and in a tone of authority, which precludes supposition that the thing is a jest.

Summoned from all quarters, cellar to garret, and out doors as well, their names, with other particulars, are taken down ; and they are told that their services will be no longer required at Llangorren. In short, they are one and all dismissed, without a word about the month's wages or warning ! If they get either, 'twill be only as a grace.

Then they receive orders to pack up and be off ; while Joseph Preece, ex-Charon, who has crossed the river in his boat, with appointment to meet the hackney there, is authorized to take temporary charge of the place ; Jack Wingate, similarly bespoke, having come down in his skiff, to stand by him in case of any opposition.

None arises. However chagrined by their hasty *sans façon* discharge, the outgoing domestics seem not so greatly surprised at it. From what they have observed

for some time going on, as also something whispered about, they had no great reliance on their places being permanent. So, in silence all submit, though somewhat sulkily; and prepare to vacate quarters they had found fairly snug.

There is one, however, who cannot be thus conveniently, or unceremoniously, dismissed—the head gamekeeper, Richard Dempsey. For, while the others are getting their *mandamus* to move, the report is brought in that he is lying on his death-bed! So the parish doctor has prognosticated. Also, that he is just then delirious, and saying queer things; some of which repeated to the police “super,” tell him his proper place, at that precise moment, is by the bed-side of the sick man.

Without a second's delay he starts off towards the lodge in which Coracle has been of late domiciled—under the guidance of its former occupant Joseph Preece—accompanied by Captain Ryecroft and Jack Wingate.

The house being but a few hundred yards

distant from the Court, they are soon inside it, and standing over the bed on which lies the fevered patient ; not at rest, but tossing to and fro—at intervals, in such violent manner as to need restraint.

The superintendent at once sees it would be idle putting questions to him. If asked his own name, he could not declare it. For he knows not himself—far less those who are around.

His face is something horrible to behold. It would but harrow sensitive feelings to give a portraiture of it. Enough to say, it is more like that of demon than man.

And his speech, poured as in a torrent from his lips, is alike horrifying—admission of many and varied crimes ; in the same breath denying them and accusing others ; his contradictory ravings garnished with blasphemous ejaculations.

A specimen will suffice, omitting the blasphemy.

“It’s a lie !” he cries out, just as they are entering the room. “A lie, every word o’t ! I didn’t murder Mary Morgan.

Served her right if I had, the jade ! She jilted me ; an' for that wasp Wingate—dog—cur ! I didn't kill her. No ; only fixed the plank. If she wor fool enough to step on't that warn't my fault. She did—she did ! Ha ! ha ! ha ! ”

For a while he keeps up the horrid cachinnation, as the glee of Satan exulting over some feat of foul *diablerie*. Then his thoughts changing to another crime, he goes on :—

“ The grand girl—the lady ! She arn't drowned ; nor dead eyther ! The priest carried her off in that French schooner. I had nothing to do with it. 'Twar the priest and Mr. Murdock. Ha ! Murdock ! I *did* drown *him*. No, I didn't. That's another lie ! T'was himself upset the boat. Let me see—was it ? No ! he couldn't, he was too drunk. I stood up on the skiff's rail. Slap over it went. What a duckin' I had for it, and a devil o' a swim too ! But I did the trick—neatly ! Didn't I, your Reverence ? Now for the hundred pounds. And you promised to double it—

you did! Keep to your bargain, or I'll peach upon you—on all the lot of you—the woman, too—the French woman! She kept that fine shawl, Indian they said it wor. She's got it now. She wanted the diamonds, too, but daren't keep *them*. The shroud! Ha! the shroud! That's all they left *me*. I ought to a' burnt it. But then the devil would a' been after and burned me! How fine Mary looked in that grand dress, wi' all them gewgaws, rings,—chains, an' bracelets, all pure gold! But I drowned her, an' she deserved it. Drowned her twice—ha—ha—ha!"

Again he breaks off with a peal of demoniac laughter, long continued.

More than an hour they remain listening to his delirious ramblings, and with interest intense. For despite its incoherence, the disconnected threads joined together make up a tale they can understand; though so strange, so brimful of atrocities, as to seem incredible.

All the while he is writhing about on the bed; till at length, exhausted, his head

droops over upon the pillow, and he lies for a while quiet—to all appearance dead!

But no; there is another throe yet, one horrible as any that has preceded. Looking up, he sees the superintendent's uniform and silver buttons; a sight which produces a change in the expression of his features, as though it had recalled him to his senses. With arms flung out as in defence, he shrieks:—

“Keep back, you —— policeman! Hands off, or I'll brain you! Hach! You've got the rope round my neck! Curse the thing! It's choking me. Hach!”

And with his fingers clutching at his throat, as if to undo a noose, he gasps out in husky voice:

“Gone by G——”

At this he drops over dead, his last word an oath, his last thought a fancy, that there is a rope around his neck!

What he has said in his unconscious confessions lays open many seeming mysteries of this romance, hitherto unrevealed. How the pseudo-priest, Father Rogier, observing

a likeness between Miss Wynn and Mary Morgan—causing him that start as he stood over the coffin, noticed by Jack Wingate—had exhumed the dead body of the latter, the poacher and Murdock assisting him. Then how they had taken it down in the boat to Dempsey's house ; soon after, going over to Llangorren, and seizing the young lady, as she stood in the summer-house, having stifled her cries by chloroform. Then, how they carried her across to Dempsey's, and substituted the corpse for the living body—the grave clothes changed for the silken dress with all its adornments—this the part assigned to Mrs. Murdock, who had met them at Coracle's cottage. Then, Dick himself hiding away the shroud, hindered by superstitious fear from committing it to the flames. In fine, how Gwendoline Wynn, drugged and still kept in a state of coma, was taken down in a boat to Chepstow, and there put aboard the French schooner *La Chouette* ; carried across to Boulogne, to be shut up in a convent for life ! All these delicate matters, managed

by Father Rogier, backed by *Messieurs les Jesuites*, who had furnished him with the means !

One after another, the astounding facts come forth as the raving man continues his involuntary admissions. Supplemented by others already known to Ryecroft and the rest, with the deductions drawn, they complete the unities of a drama, iniquitous as ever enacted.

Its motives declare themselves ; all wicked save one. This a spark of humanity that had still lingered in the breast of Lewin Murdock ; but for which Gwendoline Wynn would never have seen the inside of a nunnery. Instead, while under the influence of the narcotic, her body would have been dropped into the Wye, just as was that wearing her ball dress ! And that same body is now wearing another dress, supposed to have been prepared for her—another shroud—reposing in the tomb where all believed Gwen Wynn to have been laid !

This last fact is brought to light on the

following day ; when the family vault of the Wynns is re-opened, and Mrs. Morgan —by marks known only to herself—identifies the remains found there as those of her own daughter !

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CALM AFTER THE STORM.

TWELVE months after the events recorded in this romance of the Wye, a boat-tourist descending the picturesque river, and inquiring about a pagoda-like structure he will see on its western side, would be told it is a summer-house, standing in the ornamental grounds of a gentleman's residence. If he ask who the gentleman is, the answer would be, Captain Vivian Ryecroft ! For the ex-officer of Hussars is now the master of Llangorren ; and, what he himself values higher, the husband of Gwendoline Wynn, once more its mistress.

Were the tourist an acquaintance of either, and on his way to make call at the Court, bringing in by the little dock, he would there see a row boat, on its stern board, in gold lettering "*The Gwendoline.*"

For the pretty pleasure craft has been restored to its ancient moorings. Still, however, remaining the property of Joseph Preece, who no longer lives in the cast-off cottage of Coracle Dick, but, like the boat itself, is again back and in service at Llan-gorren.

If the day be fine this venerable and versatile individual will be loitering beside it, or seated on one of its thwarts, pipe in mouth, indulging in the *dolce far niente*. And little besides has he to do, since his pursuits are no longer varied, but now exclusively confined to the calling of waterman to the Court. He and his craft are under charter for the remainder of his life, should he wish it so—as he surely will.

The friendly visitor keeping on up to the house, if at the hour of luncheon, will in all likelihood there meet a party of old acquaintances—ours, if not his. Besides the beautiful hostess at the table's head, he will see a lady of the “antique brocaded type,” who herself once presided there, by name Miss Dorothea Linton ; another known

as Miss Eleanor Lees ; and a fourth, youngest of the quartette, *yclept* Kate Mahon. For the school girl of the Boulogne Convent has escaped from its austere studies ; and is now most part of her time resident with the friend she helped to escape from its cloisters.

Men there will also be at the Llangorren luncheon table ; likely three of them, in addition to the host himself. One will be Major Mahon ; a second the Reverend William Musgrave ; and the third, Mr. George Shenstone ! Yes ; George Shenstone, under the roof, and seated at the table of Gwendoline Wynn, now the wife of Vivian Ryecroft !

To explain a circumstance seemingly so singular, it is necessary to call in the aid of a saying, culled from that language richest of all others in moral and metaphysical imagery—the Spanish. It has a proverb, *un claco saca otro claco*—“one nail drives out the other.” And, watching the countenance of the baronet’s son, so long sad and clouded, seeing how, at intervals, it

brightens up—these intervals when his eyes meet those of Kate Mahon—it were easy predicting that in his case the adage will ere long have additional verification.

* * * * *

Were the same tourist to descend the Wye at a date posterior, and again make a call at Llangorren, he would find that some changes had taken place in the interval of his absence. At the boat dock Old Joe would likely be. But not as before in sole charge of the pleasure craft; only pottering about, as a pensioner retired on full pay; the acting and active officer being a younger man, by name Wingate, who is now waterman to the Court. Between these two, however, there is no spite about the displacement—no bickerings nor heartburnings. How could there, since the younger addresses the older as “uncle”; himself in return being styled “nevvv”?

No need to say, that this relationship has been brought about by the bright eyes of Amy Preece. Nor is it so new. In the lodge where Jack and Joe live together is

a brace of chubby chicks; one of them a boy—the possible embryo of a Wye water-man—who, dandled upon old Joe's knees, takes delight in weeding his frosted whiskers, while calling him “good granddaddy.”

As Jack's mother—who is also a member of this happy family—forewarned him, the wildest grief must in time give way, and Nature's laws assert their supremacy. So has he found it; and though still holding Mary Morgan in sacred, honest remembrance, he—as many a true man before, and others as true to come—has yielded to the inevitable.

Proceeding on to the Court the friendly visitor will at certain times there meet the same people he met before; but the majority of them having new names or titles. An added number in two interesting olive branches there also, with complexions struggling between *blonde* and *brunette*, who call Captain and Mrs. Ryecroft their papa and mamma; while the lady who was once Eleanor Lees—the “companion”—is now Mrs. Musgrave, life companion not to the

curate of Llangorren Church, but its *rector*. The living having become vacant, and in the bestowal of Llangorren's heiress, has been worthily bestowed on the Reverend William.

Two other old faces, withal young ones, the returned tourist will see at Llangorren—their owners on visit as himself. He might not know either of them by the names they now bear—Sir George and Lady Shenstone. For when he last saw them the gentleman was simply Mr. Shenstone, and the lady Miss Mahon. The old baronet is dead, and the young one, succeeding to the title, has also taken upon himself another title—that of husband—proving the Spanish apothegm true, both in the spirit and to the letter.

If there be any nail capable of driving out another, it is that sent home by the glance of an Irish girl's eye—at least so thinks Sir George Shenstone, with good reason for thinking it.

There are two other individuals, who come and go at the Court—the only ones

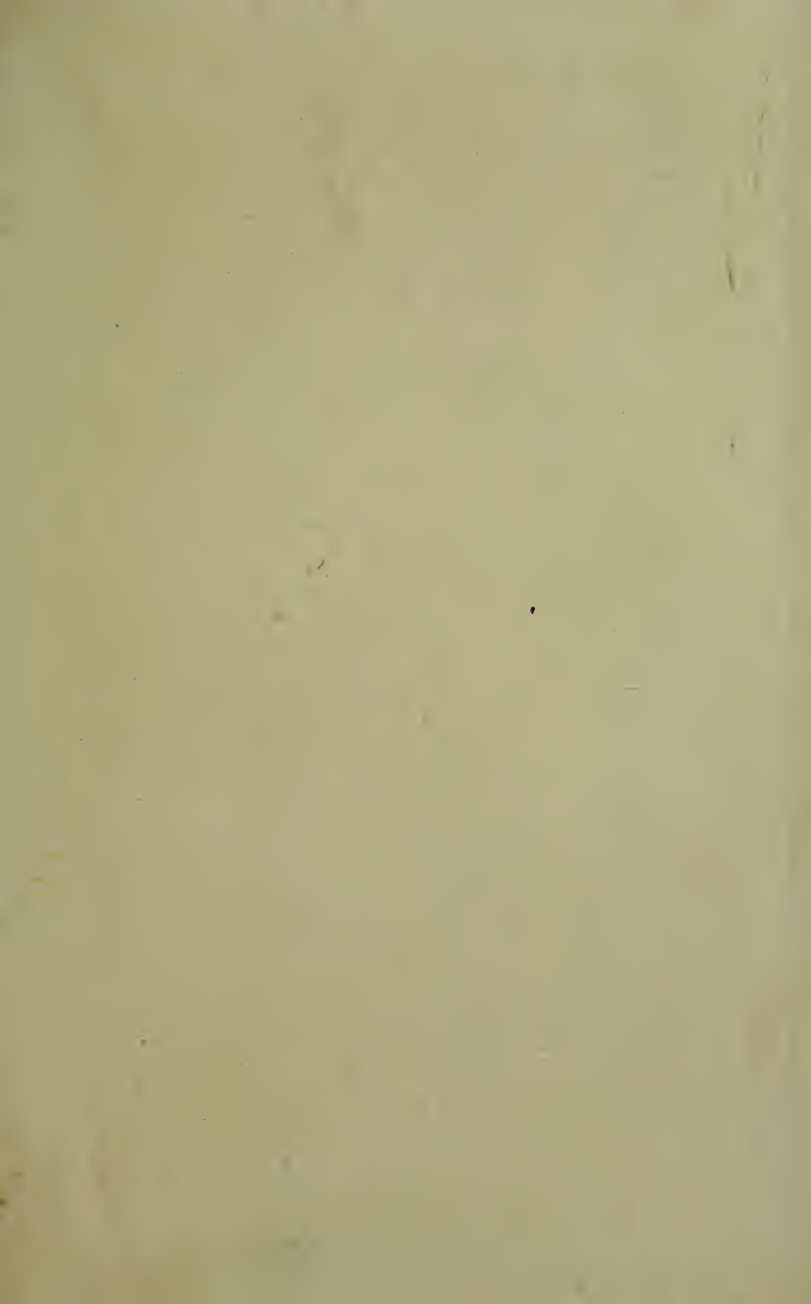
holding out, and likely to hold, against change of any kind. For Major Mahon is still Major Mahon, rolling on in his rich Irish brogue as ever abhorrent of matrimony. No danger of his becoming a Benedict!

And as little of Miss Linton being transformed into a sage woman. It would be strange if she should, with the love novels she continues to devour, and the "Court Intelligence" she gulps down, keeping alive the hallucination that she is still a belle at Bath and Cheltenham.

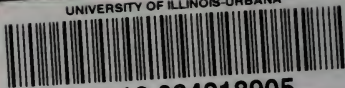
So ends our "Romance of the Wye;" a drama of happy *denouement* to most of the actors in it; and, as hoped, satisfactory to all who have been spectators.

THE END.





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